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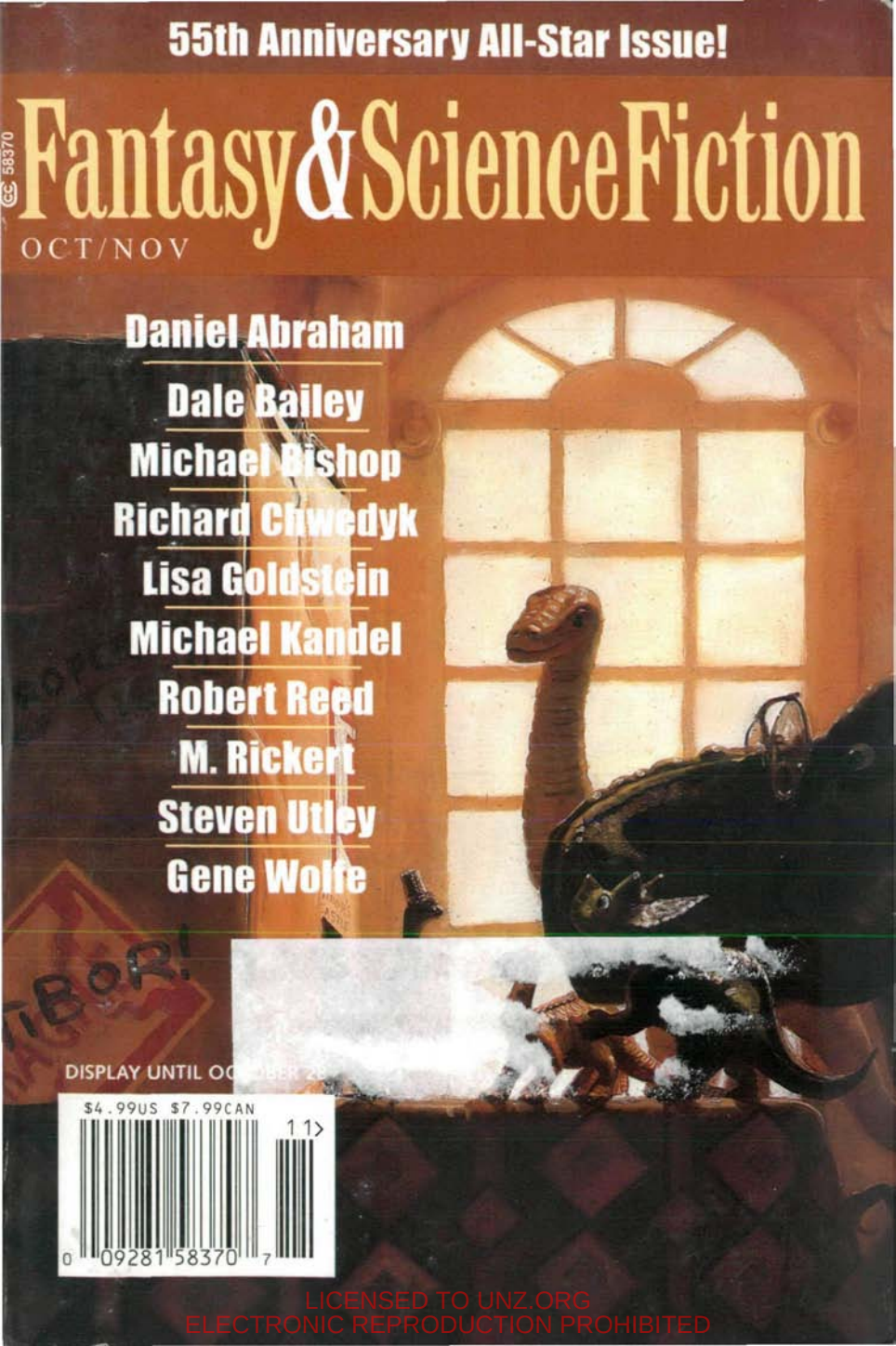

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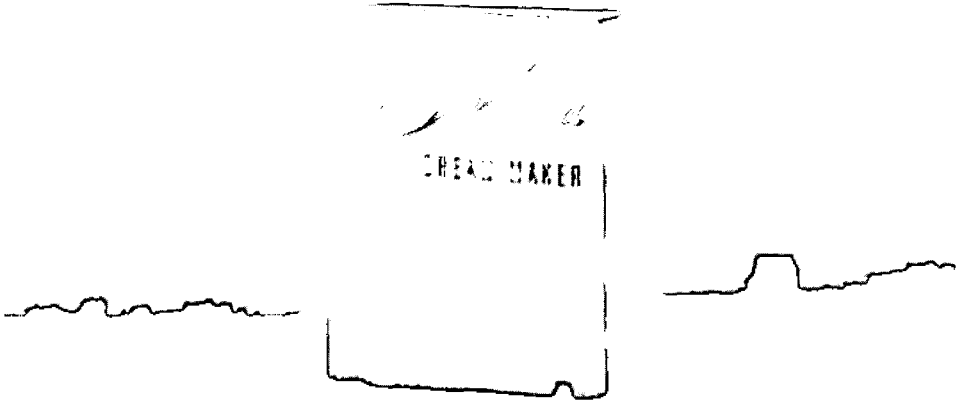

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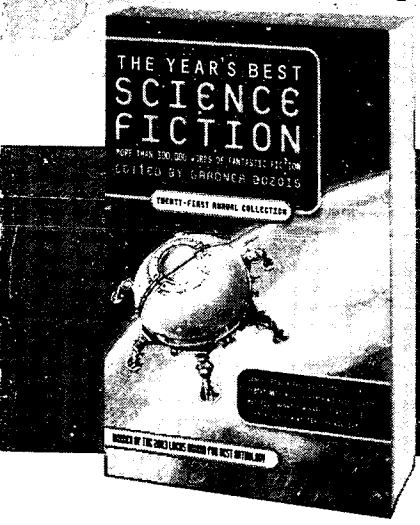

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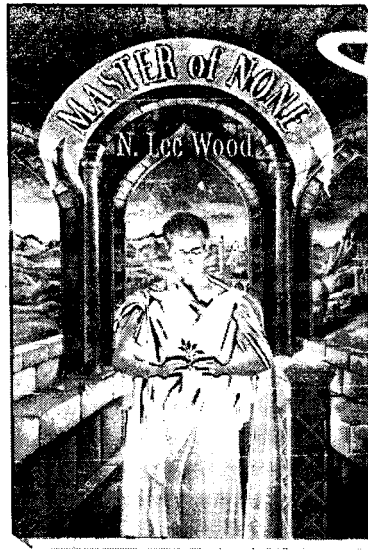

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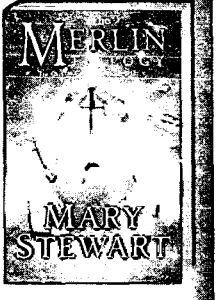

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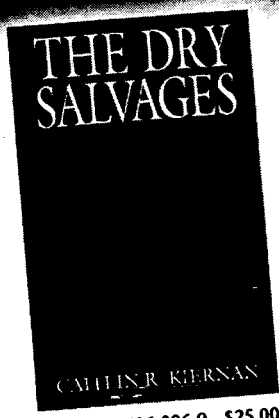

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Lisa Goldstein's many novels include The Dream Years, Strange Devices of the Sun and Moon, The Red Magician, Dark Cities Underground, *and* Tourists. *There are rumors afoot that she has begun writing under a pseudonym, but on this topic she will only say that she is most definitely* not *writing as "Robin Hobb." Ms. Goldstein writes short fiction much too infrequently for our tastes, but when she does, the results are usually very interesting and enjoyable...as is the case in this new take on a classic tale.*

Finding Beauty

By Lisa Goldstein

ONE BY ONE THE WISE WOMEN entered and sat in a circle around the cradle. There was Betony, who had grown vague and nearsighted over the years, and Bramble, who shook with palsy and needed help sitting down. There was Juniper with her endless knitting, and Tansy, whose cloak had turned the color of the wall behind her, so that the eye slipped over her and moved on to the next woman. And Anise with her coruscating gown of many colors, which the older women dismissed as ostentation.

The queen sat quietly and rocked the cradle. She had the look of all new mothers who have delivered a perfect child, smug and loving at the same time. Without realizing it she had begun to hum a lullaby.

Finally all the women had arrived. The queen looked up at the witches and smiled. "Please bless my son," she said. "Give him the virtues he'll need to rule the kingdom, whatever you think he should have. I rely on your judgment."

Betony, the oldest, went first. "He will be very handsome, the comeliest in the kingdom," she said. Then they continued around the

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circle; Bramble gave him health, and Anise laughter, and Tansy the desire to rule fairly and with wisdom.

The queen's attention wandered. Truth to tell, she did not believe these women needed to bless her child, who was already flawless in every way, but her husband had urged her to perform the ancient ceremony. "You know these old biddies," the king had said. "Flatter them, pretend they're important. They could probably do some mischief if you don't go through the motions with them."

She forced herself to listen. "I give him the gift of charm," Juniper was saying. "All will love him and delight in his company. He will be famed for his grace from one end of the kingdom to the other, and the people will call him Prince Charming."

How lovely, the queen thought. She smiled and gazed down at the child.

The door to the nursery opened. A cold wind blew through the room, brushing aside cloaks and skirts and scarves and tapestries. Candles flickered perilously; one flame reached out hungrily to the hangings around the boy's bed before steadying.

"Charming?" the woman standing at the door said. "You always were a fool, Juniper. You might as well have given him stupidity and be done with it."

The woman came into the room and glared at the others. "Didn't think to invite me, did you?" she said. She was stocky and gray-haired; in this company of wild eccentrics she looked very ordinary, like someone's grandmother. Who on Earth was she?

"You don't remember me, do you?" the woman said. The queen stirred uncomfortably; had the witch read her mind? "I'm Yarrow. I was at the coronation, and at your wedding too, dearie."

The queen opened her mouth to demand respect. Suddenly, though, she did remember her. There had been a circle of witches at the wedding, and yes, this woman had been among them. Then she had disappeared, gone back to the forest where she lived, and no one had mentioned her in the years since. The queen had forgotten all about her.

"We sent a messenger to the forest for you," the queen said. Not for nothing had the king insisted she learn diplomatic skills. "But he couldn't find — "

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"Liar," Yarrow said pleasantly. "Is that what you'll teach your son, how to lie? Is that the ability you want me to give him?"

"No, no, please." The queen heard the fear in her voice. Ridiculous, she thought. My husband could banish her over breakfast, without even thinking about it.

"What about a delight in cruelty?" Yarrow said. "Would you like that for your son? Or forgetfulness, the ability to forget a poor old witch living alone in the forest? Perhaps I should just make him feeble-minded, turn his brains to porridge."

"No!" the queen said. She looked around the room. "Help me, someone — please!"

No one moved. They were afraid of this woman, she saw, and her own fear grew.

"I swear I didn't mean to slight you. I swear I would have invited you if — "

"If you'd remembered, yes of course, dearie." Yarrow moved closer to the cradle. "There are some things you just don't see. Not your fault, of course — it's the way you were raised." She studied the infant. "Blind?" she asked, meditatively.

"No!"

"No, all right, I have it," Yarrow said. The queen tried to stand but could not move; some unseen force seemed to hold her back. Yarrow raised her hand over the cradle. "I give you your destiny. There is a princess who was once the desire of every man who saw her, a woman surpassingly fair. But she fell into an enchanted sleep, and though many men tried to bring her back to life none succeeded, and the world forgot her. It will be your fate to quest for her and to find her while you are still young. You will see her sleeping amid the ruins of her castle, and you will kiss her. And at that kiss she will awaken, and you will marry her."

The queen let out her breath. "You — I — that — "

"That wasn't so bad?" Yarrow said. "Well, perhaps it wasn't."

The queen thought over everything Yarrow had said. A princess surpassingly fair. A successful quest while the prince was still young. A marriage. She could find nothing wrong. But then why was she so frightened? Why had Yarrow's last words made her shiver?

"I — I thank you," the queen said, trying to keep her voice steady. She

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looked around the room. "I thank you all for your help, your wonderful gifts. You are excused now." And she picked up the child and went out of the room, leaving the witches to gossip behind her.

THE QUEEN FORBADE all mention of Yarrow's words, and she did her best to forget everything that had happened that day. She noticed with disgust that folks began to call the prince Charming, a name which, after what Yarrow had said, she no longer found as lovely, but she resigned herself to it. If that was the only result of that dreadful day, she thought, they had gotten off lightly.

She had to admit, though, that the boy lived up to his name. Everyone loved him, from the cooks to the chamberlain; he knew all their names and would stop and talk to them as if they were his dearest friends. And while he talked to them he did seem to hold them in genuine esteem, but when he left he would shrug them off and go on to the next person, and the next, and charm them in turn.

In fact, the queen thought, the boy seemed somewhat feckless, unable to stick with anyone or anything. She had once discovered him playing cards with his tutor, and when she asked how long their lessons had been neglected she was unable to get an answer from either one of them. The cook slipped him extra desserts, and a whole host of boys came forward to take the blame whenever anything in the castle broke or got lost.

It could be worse, though; the queen knew that. He could be.... But she was never able to finish the thought; she would simply look at him and smile, as charmed by him as all the rest.

When Charming was ten he came to her and asked about the enchanted woman he was supposed to rescue. Someone had told him the story, then; well, it was bound to get out, the way the people in the castle gossiped. She repeated the prophecy in as offhand a tone as she could manage.

"I doubt it's true, though," she said. "Yarrow wanted to frighten us, that's all. She was a bitter old woman."

"What did she say about the princess, though?" he asked. His eyes seemed lit with excitement. "Will she be beautiful?"

The queen thought back. She had tried so hard to forget the prophecy that she could truly not remember all of it. "Surpassingly fair, I think."

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"But fair could mean anything!" he said. "She could be beautiful, or honest, or have a pale complexion...."

The queen's fear returned. Suppose the woman were honest but very ugly? Could that have been what Yarrow had meant? The queen had not managed to have other children; what if her grandchildren were hideous? Would the people even acknowledge their rule?

Then she remembered something with relief. "No, she said that the woman was the desire of everyone who saw her. She must be beautiful then."

Beautiful or able to enchant people to desire her, the queen thought. No — she would not think about it. Nothing bad would happen to her son. And to her relief he appeared satisfied with her answers, and went away looking thoughtful.

He seemed unwilling to let the subject alone, though. "How long will this quest take?" he asked a few days later, while she was sitting at her desk and planning the castle's meals. "She said I'll find this woman when I'm still young — what's the oldest you can be and still be called young?"

"I don't know, Charming, truly."

"But I have to know how much food to take with me when I go."

Fear overwhelmed her, so that she saw and heard nothing for a while. "You're not going anywhere until you're older, do you hear me?" she said finally. "And if you do go on this ridiculous quest you'll take any number of soldiers and hunters and trackers with you."

He came back a few days later, when she was embroidering with her ladies-in-waiting. "What if I find her but I don't want to marry her?" he asked.

The women laughed. "You can marry anyone you like, dearie," one of them said.

The queen shivered at the word dearie, though she did not know why. "Please, stop bothering me about this," she said to Charming. "Those witches are nothing but a pack of confused old women. Anyway, I haven't seen any of them since you were born — they're probably all dead now."

"Father believes them."

That was true; the king believed all sorts of things. He consulted the ancient priests every morning and listened to their prophecies, and he would do no work that day if the omens were unfavorable. It had been her

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husband, the queen remembered, who had asked her to invite the witches to bless her child — and look where that had led.

"I don't want to discuss this anymore," she said.

The years passed. Charming stopped asking questions, though whether he had forgotten all about Yarrow or was questioning others the queen didn't know. For herself she managed to put aside Yarrow's words for whole seasons, and there were times when she was even happy. But the prophecy would come back to her at odd moments — in the midst of banquets, or as she nodded off to sleep — and she cursed the woman with all her heart.

Then, on the morning of Charming's eighteenth birthday, she awoke to find him gone.

THE SUMMER THAT YEAR was mild, the days pleasantly warm. The trees hung heavy with fruit, so that Charming had only to reach out for a pear or an apple when he felt hungry. When evening came he went a little ways off the road and tethered his horse and lay down, the nights so balmy he did not even need a blanket.

He did not think about any of this. He had always had an easy time of it, and he had never doubted that his quest to find the princess would be more of the same. He did not think about the many years of peace that had created the wealth he saw in the countryside, or how hard his father the king had worked to keep his realm from war. He sometimes sang about ancient quests as he rode, about heroes who had faced dragons and war and death, but it did not occur to him to compare their situation with his own.

And it did not surprise him that he found what he sought a scant two weeks after he started out. A miller he met told him a story about an enchanted castle. "They say a princess lies sleeping in the ruins," the miller said. "I've never heard of anyone who went to look, though."

Charming thanked him. As they parted the miller gave him a fresh loaf of bread, though Charming had not asked for it, or told him who he was. The prince thanked him again, by rote this time; he had long ago grown used to people giving him things.

In the week that followed he found more and more people who knew about the ruined castle. One of them told him that the princess was called

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Beauty, and at this his excitement grew. I knew it! he thought. I knew she would be beautiful.

Finally one morning he squinted up at a mountain peak and saw a mass of tumbled walls and fallen boulders. He sighed a little to himself — the path up the mountain looked steep and difficult — but then he shrugged and turned his horse toward the foothills.

The path *was* steep; he was sweating by the end. At the top he saw that a briar hedge had once guarded the castle, but the plants had died sometime over the years and his horse stepped over them easily.

Beyond the briar stood the wreckage of the castle walls. He hesitated, wondering if he should clean himself before he presented himself to the princess. But his eagerness and curiosity got the better of him and he urged his horse over the fallen castle gate; the hooves made a hollow sound on the rotting wood.

The floor within was marble. Whole sections of the roof had fallen in, and he had to be careful where he placed his horse's feet. A dusky sun shone through the gaps in the roof, illuminating worm-eaten tapestries and broken furniture.

He explored the entire castle this way, moving from shade to sun and back to shade again. He saw chairs and tables warped by rain, and rusted swords and shields hanging against the walls, and the bones of small animals who had starved looking for food. In one high tower he found great piles of ruined books; perhaps a wise man had worked here, searching in vain for an answer to the princess's enchantment.

He had had to dismount to climb the tower, and when he came back down he continued from place to place on foot. A while later he found himself exploring rooms he had already seen, and he realized he had gone through the entire castle.

Could this be the witch's curse, that he would look for the sleeping princess and not find her? If so it was a paltry curse, ridiculous even; he had had a fine time on his travels, and he would come home with any number of good stories to tell his friends. He left the castle and gazed up at the ruins again.

This time he saw something he had missed before, a small tower near the back. He went inside again and headed toward the tower. And yes, there it was, a shaded alcove and stairs leading upward beyond it.

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He began to climb. His heart was beating loudly; he could not remember ever having this feeling of anticipation. The stairs ended at a small circular room. A woman lay on a bed under a window.

He moved closer. His blood thrummed in his ears. And now he saw the witch's terrible design, the purpose behind the curse she had laid on him. The woman had aged along with the castle.

Her face was scored by lines, hundreds of them, and marred with blotches. Her eyelids were thin as paper, her nose a bony beak, her mouth sunken. Bristly hair sprouted from her chin and above her lips. The hair on her head was gray, and so sparse that Charming could see patches of her scalp; thin wormy strands reached to her thighs.

At the thought of her thighs the prince turned away, shuddering. The witch had been fair, scrupulously so, he thought. Surely the princess had been beautiful once, and surely men had quested for her without success.

How old was she? A man he had spoken to on the road thought that the enchantment had happened a hundred years ago; if the princess had been, say, twenty, or even fifteen....

He shuddered again, but with pity and not disgust this time. He could still give her a kiss, he thought; he did not see how he could be made to marry her.

He forced himself to turned back. Now he noticed a sour odor coming from her skin, the smell of old age. He took a breath and leaned over and kissed her. Her lips tasted like dust.

She stirred. Horror and pity overwhelmed him. What had he done? How could he have been so stupid, why hadn't he let her sleep forever? Could he call back his kiss?

No, she was stretching now, and opening her eyes. A cataract filmed one eye, a gob like an egg white. She smiled; it was a young girl's smile, the expression of someone who had grown used to being loved for her beauty. Her teeth were gray. The prince took a step backward.

"Who are you?" she asked. "My legs hurt, and my arms. Have I been ill? Why can't I see you properly?"

"You — " The prince cleared his throat. "You've been under an enchantment."

"That's right," the princess said. "I remember now. A horrid old

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woman said that I would sleep for a hundred years. And have I?" She tried to push herself up but fell back on the bed, breathing heavily.

"Yes, my lady. You — "

The princess cried out. Her voice was hoarse, from age and from disuse; her scream sounded like a rusty box being forced open. She had brought her veined and misshapen hands close to her eyes, Charming saw; they looked like bags of lumpy produce.

"What happened to me? What happened to my hands? Why can't I sit up? Am I still under that evil woman's spell?"

He did not want to tell her. He wanted to run from the room, mount his horse, and ride home as fast as he could. Someone else could come back and take care of her, a friend or one of the castle servants.

He couldn't do that to her, though. "You've been asleep for a hundred years," he said. "And in that time — "

"I've aged a hundred years?" Her voice rose in a screech on the last words. "But I'm — I was eighteen years old. I was eighteen just yesterday! How could I...what...oh, curse that woman! I'll kill her! My father will kill her!"

She sat up, panicked. "Where's my father? Is he dead?"

He probably was, the prince thought. Now he understood the destruction he had seen in the castle: When they had not been able to break the enchantment the people had fled, hoping to live a normal life elsewhere. The king had probably grown old and died, along with the cooks and washer-women and advisers and dressmakers and grooms.

Fortunately he did not have to tell her this, at least not yet. She had doubled over and was sobbing and screaming, unable to believe her terrible fate.

She cried until she was exhausted, and then fell asleep. When he was certain she would not waken for a while he lifted her — she weighed almost nothing — and carried her down the tower stairs and outside. He found a cart in the stables and laid her in it gently, then fixed the cart to his horse and headed home.

She slept for a long time. He felt relieved that he didn't have to talk to her, or hear her terrible cries.

In the evening they stopped at an inn. As he took her in his arms her eyes opened, but she said nothing and stared straight ahead of her, no

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emotion at all on her face. He carried her inside and got rooms for them both. "Your grandmother?" the innkeeper asked, and Charming scowled at him.

Her expression did not change as he took her to her room and set her gently on the bed. He went to his own room, pulled off his boots, and lay down.

He could not sleep; he felt haunted by something he had not done. But no one could have behaved better, he was certain of that. He would take her home and give her into the care of his own physician, who would see that she rested comfortably for the rest of her life. A short life, sadly, but there was nothing he could do about that. He had lived up to his name, he had been as charming as he knew how. They could ask nothing more from him.

Still, he felt ashamed. He remembered how relieved he had been when she had fallen asleep. He hated illness and disfigurement of all kinds; he could not even look at beggars on the street but had to delegate one of his friends to give them money.

He knew he lacked something, strength perhaps, or perseverance. He knew that folks thought him frivolous, his amusements trivial; even his best friends thought so. He had never cared until this moment, when he wished profoundly he had something more to give her.

Well, the witches had named him Charming, after all. They had not made him resolute, or valiant, or virtuous. He could not be blamed for his faults; he was as they had created him. He rolled over and went to sleep.

He woke with a brilliant idea. Perhaps her enchantment could be broken. He could talk to his father's priests, he could even find the wise women who had blessed him. Yarrow might still be alive; perhaps she had arranged for him to find the princess so that he could cure her. And then, when he had managed to roll back the years, she would emerge in all her beauty, as she had been....

The thought made him queasy. How could he love her when he had seen her in old age? He shrugged; he would answer that question when he came to it.

A harsh cry came from one of the rooms. She had woken up. He stood and hurried down the hall.

His journey home was as uneventful as the ride outward. The princess

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either slept or stared ahead of her without speaking. She broke her silence only once, when they came to another inn and Charming lifted her from the cart.

"I can walk, you know," she said.

"Are you certain?" he asked.

"Of course I'm certain. Put me down, you oaf."

He set her carefully on her feet. She took a few steps and then cried out in pain.

He lifted her in his arms again. "Put me down!" she said. "This is all your fault, for waking me up. I hate you!"

He continued to carry her; they both knew she couldn't walk. But the childish words coming from the ancient face shocked him, and he had to remind himself that despite what she looked like she was still a young woman.

When Charming reached the castle he thought briefly of his parents and how worried they must be, but instead of going to them he took the woman to the royal physician's chambers.

"I can't do much for her," the physician said, after Charming had related his story and he had studied the princess a while. "I can only ease her hurts until she dies. She has but a few weeks to live, I think."

"What if I can undo the spell that put her to sleep?" Charming asked.

"You can't undo time, my lad," the other man said. He opened several of the tiny drawers where he kept his herbs and powders and began to mix a potion.

The physician's words made little impression on Charming; he was used to getting his own way. He went to his parents, and after they had exclaimed in relief over his return he asked them about the wise women of the kingdom. The queen did not remember any of them, or so she said; Charming had always thought she knew more than she showed. But the king took him to the Hall of Records and brought out an ancient parchment with their names and vague directions to where they lived.

Charming tried to find Yarrow first, but the forest was wild and the roads confusing, and the landmarks seemed to have changed over the years. He found the others more easily, or at least their houses; Betony and some of the others had died in the years since his birth.

Anise was still alive, though she no longer wore the changing colors

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his father had told him about. She invited him into the cottage and insisted he take the most comfortable chair. The room was filled with hanging plants, and an orange cat slept curled up on a blanket. Light made dappled patterns on the floor, tinged with green by the leaves.

Anise served him tea and cinnamon bread and exclaimed over how much he had changed since he was a baby. "I wanted to talk to you about that day," he said. "When you all came and blessed me."

She listened carefully while he recounted his story. "I don't know any enchantment like that," she said when he had finished. "Well, since I blessed you at your birth I've had less and less to do with magic. What is a spell, after all? Plant a seed and you make a flower. Strike a spark and you create fire. Are these spells? When girls come to me for love charms I tell them to comb their hair differently, and it seems to work just as well. Perhaps the whole world is an enchantment, seen the right way."

"Do you know where Yarrow lives?" he asked.

"I haven't thought of her in years," Anise said. "She's in the forest somewhere, isn't she?"

He thanked her, and she gave him a fresh-baked loaf of the bread to take with him on his travels. As he rode away from her cottage he mulled over the odd things she had said. He thought that the truth was just the opposite, that the world needed more magic, not less. He could have used a great many more blessings at his birth, though he had been too polite to say so.

Finally he had tracked down all the living witches except Yarrow, and had spoken to all his father's priests. No one knew how to break the enchantment; a few of them told him frankly that his quest was impossible.

To everyone's surprise the princess did not die after a few weeks but continued on weakly from one day to the next. The physician told Charming that she seemed less devastated by her enchantment as time went on. "She'll never accept it, of course," he said. "But she might not be so angry when she dies."

Charming knew why the man was telling him all this; the physician wanted him to visit the sickroom. But that, he knew, he could not do. He did not have the courage to face her; he could barely stand to think about her, disfigured by age and illness. More than that, he felt responsible for her somehow, felt that, as she had said, it was all his fault.

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No, he would find a way to break the enchantment. He would visit her only then, when he could bring her the glad news.

A year passed. His friends had stopped asking him to go drinking or dancing with them; among themselves they considered him mad, perhaps ensorcelled himself. They had never known him to pursue anything with such urgency. And still the princess continued to live, her bony ribcage rising and falling with each difficult breath.

The summer was a hard one, much worse than last year. A drought had come to the land, withering the crops, and a horde of insects had taken what little was left. The king worked day and night, talking to his priests, working out ways to divert water, bargaining with nearby kingdoms for grain.

Charming barely saw him. But he would not have seen him in any case; he spent all his time away from the castle. He rode far and wide, looking for wise men and women or searching the twisting paths of the forest for Yarrow.

In the countryside he saw field after field of dead crops. The castle still had a storehouse of grain, and Charming shared as much of his food as he could with the hungry folk he met on his travels. He had never seen the people of the kingdom so wretched, and he tried again and again to think of ways to help them. There was nothing he could do, though, and he returned to the task that had been given to him, the breaking of the spell.

Summer became autumn, and then winter. Charming rode out unprepared for the cold and caught a chill. The physician insisted that he rest in the sickroom, though he felt anxious to be on his way; every day he delayed could be the day the princess died.

He spent long dreamy days in the sickroom. The floor was old scuffed wood, the walls whitewashed, the bed clean and comfortable. Candles burned; herbs smoldered in pots in the corners. The room had a window but he never rose to look out of it; instead he followed the progress of the sun by watching its light move slowly across the floor and up the opposite wall.

He had strange fever dreams, where princesses and priests, children and cats and forests all combined into one great story. In these dreams he seemed to understand everything, seemed to hold the answer to all his questions, but when he awoke all his insights slipped away.

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One day he heard laughter coming from another room. The physician said something, and an old woman answered. No, not an old woman. The princess.

He sat up, his heart pounding. His first thought was to run, though the princess could have no idea that he lay just down the hall from her. He fell back and tried to calm himself. He did not have to see her; he would leave the sickroom in a few days and never come back.... But she was laughing, he thought. What did she have to laugh about?

The physician came into his room. "Was that — were you talking to the princess?" Charming asked, though he was certain he had recognized the voice.

"Yes," the physician said.

"How is she?"

"She's doing quite well."

"Well?" he said, feeling a sudden hope. "Do you mean — have you broken the enchantment?"

"No, of course not. The enchantment that holds her can't be broken, not by magic or medicine. No, I mean that she cries less, and sometimes she even laughs."

"Why was she laughing?"

The physician studied him. "Why don't you visit her yourself? You're well enough to spend a few minutes with her."

Charming shook his head. He felt ill, as though his fever had returned. And he hated himself for his cowardice in front of the other man, though he knew that no one had ever expected more from him. He would rest, be as charming to the physician as ever, and then leave the sickroom for good.

He continued to hear the conversations between the two. In one of them the princess laughed again, and he thought about walking down the hall and knocking on her door. He knew how to enter a room, at least; he had spent hours practicing an offhanded manner that looked simple but was in fact terribly difficult. But in the next moment she began to sob, and the physician lowered his voice and spoke in soothing tones, and he sat in his bed and felt bile come into his throat.

Finally the physician told him he was well enough to leave. He dressed in the clothes he had arrived in, then went to the door and opened it. He stood there a while, uncertain. To his disgust he was trembling

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slightly. He could go to the left and visit the princess, or to the right and continue as he had been, riding after the least rumor of a healer or wise woman and ignoring everything else.

Without letting himself think about it he turned left. He walked up to the door and knocked.

"Come in," a voice said.

He opened the door and went inside. The room was dim, and he tripped over something on the floor. A graceful entrance indeed, he thought, disgusted with himself.

"Oh," the woman said. "It's you. I thought it was the physician."

"No," he said.

His eyes adjusted to the light, and he could see her better now. She was a little less thin, and her hair was combed and her eyes more alert, but she still looked like a ruin of a woman, a dried-out hag. Lines scored her face like ancient riverbeds.

His mind formed a courteous phrase about how well she seemed, but the words stuck in his throat. "I came to see how you were," he said.

"How did you expect me to be?" she asked.

A good question. He struggled on. "Are you — are you resting comfortably?"

She did not answer. Charming, who had talked easily to kings and diplomats and serving maids, could not think of a single thing to say. The silence grew intolerable. There had never been an empty moment in any of his conversations; he had always rushed to fill them with jokes and news and gossip.

He blurted the first thing that came to mind. "Do you still hate me?"

"What?" She had been drifting, he realized, might not have even heard his first question.

"You told me you hated me once. It was one of the first things you said to me."

"Oh. No, of course not. It wasn't your fault." She struggled to concentrate. "Why are you here?" she asked. "The true reason, this time."

"I — I wondered how you were. Truly."

"But you haven't visited in a year and a half. Why are you wondering only now?"

Once again he could think of nothing to say, had no answer to her

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bluntness. She laughed. "I'm allowed to say whatever I like, to be as rude as I want," she said. "People make allowances for you if they think you'll die at any moment."

"But I did wonder about you. I think about you every day, every moment. I've been very busy, though — I'm looking for a way to break your enchantment."

She laughed again, louder. The laugh turned into a cough, which went on and on. "Can you turn back time?" she asked when she could speak.

"You've been listening to the physician. Ignore him — he's a sour old pessimist. I truly think I can find Yarrow and get her to undo her spell."

"He never said a word to me about this." She took a sip of water. "You think I speak too frankly. I think no one's ever spoken frankly to you in your life. And one of the things they might have told you is that you are avoiding me, that you go off on this silly quest so that you don't have to see me."

This was outrageous. "I don't need an excuse to avoid you," he said. "I didn't have to visit you at all, but I heard your voice and I wondered how you were. I've spent a year and a half trying to help you. I didn't expect gratitude, but I thought — "

"Oh, but you did."

"What?"

"You did expect gratitude. You expected me to be grateful to you forever for saving my life."

"Very well, maybe I did. Anyone would feel the same. Anyone would want some acknowledgment of the work they've done, some thanks — "

"Why? I never asked for your help in the first place. If you'd bothered to talk to me I would have said that your quest is hopeless, that I would much rather have you pass the time with me, the way we're doing now."

"You can't believe that."

"Maybe at first I didn't. But I've come to realize that I will never be free of this curse, that I'm trapped in this horrible body — "

"You don't know that," he said. She didn't answer. He pressed his advantage, speaking into the silence. "And what did you mean when you said that I was avoiding you? I'm under no obligation to visit you at all."

"That's true. But you do seem to be avoiding me, or avoiding something."

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He saw a way he could turn this dreadful conversation, head it toward a familiar road. "Hard work, probably," he said. He smiled his most engaging smile, then wondered if she could see it with her ruined eyes. "That's what my father says, anyway."

"He does?" she asked. She had caught his mood, thank the gods. "And does he have any reason for this opinion?"

"Quite a few reasons, actually." Charming realized he was standing, and he took a seat near the bed and lounged in it, trying to look relaxed. "I'm appalled at the amount of work it takes to run the kingdom. I told my father I would hire men to do the work for me, and he said that looking after those men was most of the work."

"My father said something similar," she said. "He didn't expect me to take over the kingdom when he died, though. When I was born a witch told him that I would prick my finger and fall into an enchanted sleep, and that I would be rescued by a prince. A handsome prince, actually."

"Really?" he said, feeling irrationally pleased. He hurried on. "But she didn't tell you that you would age during your sleep?"

"No."

"Why did she do this to you?"

"My father cut down the forest where she lived. He said he had to, that people needed to get from one town to another, that thieves lived in the forest.... I can't help but wonder if it was truly necessary. And if he would have done it had he known what would happen."

"Of course he wouldn't have."

"No, probably not. He's — he could be cruel, though, especially when someone stood in his way. Not at all like your father."

"You've met my father?"

"And your mother. Why are you so surprised? They visit me nearly every week."

"They're good people," he said, realizing it only then. He had had little to compare them to.

The princess yawned, then winced with some pain. "I'm afraid I tire easily," she said.

"I'm truly sorry, my lady. I wasn't thinking. I've had a wonderful time — can I see you again?"

She said nothing. He saw that he had hurt her, but how? Perhaps it was

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when he called the visit wonderful, though any gentleman would have said the same; he certainly hadn't been mocking her. And he realized to his surprise that he *had* enjoyed himself, especially at the end; he had almost forgotten what she looked like.

"Of course," she said finally, and he stood and left her.

He saw the princess every few days. He grew used to her forthright conversation, and even took some pleasure in it; no one in the castle had ever spoken so boldly to him. The physician had been right, he saw. She had not accepted her fate, but in a year and a half she had found a way to endure. Her courage amazed him; he knew that he himself could never have been so brave.

"I heard what became of my father, and of my mother," she said one day. She looked at him keenly with her one good eye, as if she expected him to care so little that he would change the subject.

"Really? What?"

"They stayed in the castle for several years, trying to find someone to break the witch's spell. But no one could, and eventually they began to fear that they would fall under the same enchantment. I don't know why — the witch hadn't cursed anyone but me. See, here's where I pricked my finger."

She held out her hand toward Charming. He nodded, though he could see nothing but her knobs and veins.

"I suppose people fear what they don't understand," she went on. Charming stirred uncomfortably; was she talking about him? No, it was not her way to speak in hints; she came out and said what she thought.

"So the entire village moved. They found a place a good distance away, and they cleared the land for crops and built a new castle. But nothing they did prospered, and the village disappeared. They tell me that some folks moved again, but most of them seem to have died. Including — " She faltered here. "Including my father and mother."

She began to cry. "I'm sorry," he said, feeling inadequate. It was a feeling he often had around her.

"I don't know why I'm crying," she said. "I didn't even like my father very much. Maybe that's why, because I never got to tell him so."

The idea that children could dislike their parents shocked him. "Maybe," he said.

"Thank you."

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"For what?"

"For listening to me. For letting me talk. For your understanding."

"I don't understand anything, my lady."

He stopped, feeling the worst sort of idiot. He should not have said that; he should have pretended to knowledge, comforted her with illusions. He was good at lies, the gods knew; he had told them all his life.

But he realized uncomfortably that he could not lie to her. Perhaps he did not want to waste what little time she had left with empty phrases. Or perhaps her fierce honesty compelled the same from him.

He searched his mind for something to say, a few words that would be kind but not dishonest. They sat for a long moment in silence. "I am trying to understand," he said finally.

She looked drained, and he saw that he had tired her once again. "Thank you," she murmured, and closed her eyes.

"Good night, my lady," he said.

HE STILL WENT OUT to search for Yarrow, though he left the castle less and less often. The drought continued through the winter and into spring; creeks and rivers dried up and the ground was nearly too hard to plow. In the taverns and inns the farmers spoke of a disastrous harvest, of surplus grain gone and nothing with which to replace it.

In one village he saw a crowd assembled in the village square, listening intently while a man spoke and gestured in front of them. Charming reined in his horse and dismounted and joined them.

He could make nothing of the man's speech; it was mostly nonsense. The man mentioned ancient practices and promises unkept; if the royal family would follow tradition, he said, shaking his fist, the rain would come and the drought would end.

Charming frowned and rode on. He would have to tell his father about this; when the common folk got strange ideas in their heads they could become dangerous.

He went to his father's study when he returned. "What exactly did this man say?" the king asked.

"Does it matter?" Charming said. "Something ridiculous. You have to make some sacrifice so the rains will come again."

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"Was he talking about me or the royal family?"

"The family, I think." Charming laughed. "What — are you saying that *I* have to sacrifice something? Should I cut my hair and walk around in rags?"

"It's not a joke. There are old traditions — the priests have been telling me about them."

"What traditions?"

"They're not certain. We've been prosperous for so long that most of these rituals have been lost. The land has to be renewed, made fertile, there has to be some sort of marriage...."

The prince laughed again. "With the land? How exactly does one take the land to bed?"

"Don't be flippant about this," the king said angrily. "I'm going to see my priests now. Do you want to come along?"

Of course Charming didn't want to come along. He started to say so, then stopped, overwhelmed by an idea so terrible that for a moment he couldn't breathe. His heart suddenly beat louder, drowning out all other sound.

"No," he said finally.

The king nodded, as if he expected no more from his son.

When the king had gone Charming went to a bay window. There was a window seat, but he stood and looked out at the castle entrance. A long line of people stood there, most dressed in rags and covered in dust from the road. They had traveled a long way to petition the king for grain, he knew, and he knew as well that there was no more grain to give them.

He sat and forced himself to think about the princess. He had come to like her, to look forward to their time together. The horror she had been through had somehow made her wise, wiser even than the witches he had spoken to along the length and breadth of the kingdom. He thought of the empty, easy conversations he had had with his old friends; these friends now seemed like mirrors, showing him whatever he wanted to see. Compared to them the princess was real, solid, the world that lay beyond the mirror.

But he had never touched her. Once or twice he had wanted to, had nearly rested his hand on hers to comfort her, but something within him had cringed at the thought. How could he...would he be able to....

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For he would have to marry her. That was what the man in the village square had meant, and his father's priests, and what Yarrow had prophesied. She was the land, withered and dried, and he was the ruler who would make her fertile again.

He had no choice in this, he knew. His father could not do it; his father was already married. And he was coming to understand that the king, or the king's son, served the people; that the people were not there for the pleasure of the king. You could not do things just because you had the power to do them; you could not chop down a forest without thinking of the consequences.

He should go, then, and ask for her hand. But he could not move, and he cast around desperately for a way to avoid his duty. He could say nothing, and the land would continue to sicken and die. Or he could get one of his friends to marry her; perhaps a substitute would work just as well. He sat by the window for a long time, watching as the sun set beyond the houses and streets and squares of the city.

Finally he came to the end of his excuses. He stood, took a lamp from the wall, and went to the princess's sickroom.

He knocked but there was no answer. She must be asleep, then. His question could not wait; he opened the door.

She stirred. He felt a mad reckless laugh rise within him; surely she would be overjoyed at his proposal. "Will you marry me?" he asked.

"What?" she said, struggling to come awake.

"I've come to ask for your hand," he said. The lamp shone full on her face and he moved it away quickly, to one of the corners.

"Are you drunk? Or did one of your friends put you up to this?"

"What? No, I want to marry you."

"No you don't."

"Yes, truly — "

"Get out. Get out and don't come back until you're sober. Better yet, don't come back at all. They told me you were a fool, but I didn't see it. Now it looks as if they were right all along."

"No, listen. Please listen to me. The priests say that someone from the royal family has to wed the land, to make the land fertile again. And so I thought — "

"You thought I was the land. Dried out, used up, wasted, barren...."

"No," he said. "I mean yes, I think you might be the land. And if we

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wed, well, the land might be renewed. And you might be renewed as well, you might regain your youth...."

That last was a lie, he realized. Somewhere in his long quest he had stopped believing he could find a way to cure her. He trailed off, unable to continue.

"I don't want to marry you," she said.

"Why not?"

She laughed. "No one has ever refused you anything, have they? You look so puzzled. How could she possibly turn me down, you're thinking. Who else could she get to marry her?"

She had read his mind again. It was hopeless, the whole thing—he had not counted on her pigheadedness. He would turn around and go, never come back....

No, he wouldn't. "The land has to be saved," he said. "People are dying of hunger, there's no more grain in the storehouses.... You have to help us, whatever you think of me. Please. I beg you."

She laughed again, softer this time. "Prince Charming is begging me. If only your youthful conquests could see you now."

Whatever he said now would be the wrong thing. He held his breath, praying to gods he only vaguely remembered.

"Do you love me?" she asked.

"I — " He met her gaze squarely, the good eye and the damaged one. "No, I don't. I'm sorry. I like you very much, though."

"I've come to love you, I'm afraid," she said. Her mouth crooked in a smile. "Well, everyone has to, don't they? You're so charming. I tried not to, but I couldn't help it. Even when you were so — so inept, when you tried to comfort me at first. It was endearing."

"They why won't you marry me?" She said nothing. "I don't understand. What do you want from me?"

"Tell me you'll never hurt me."

"But I can't lie to you!" he said in frustration. "How can I keep from hurting you if I have to tell you the truth?"

"Don't you see?" she said. "It's the lies that cause me pain."

His parents were the only witnesses at the wedding. His mother cried, though for reasons other than the traditional ones. She had tried to talk

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him out of the marriage; what if, she said, the wretched woman didn't die for years? Already she had lived far longer than anyone expected. What about Charming's duty to provide heirs for the kingdom?

Charming had shrugged. He did not think the princess could live much longer, but whatever happened he knew he would stay with her until one or the other of them died. His father had said nothing, but Charming would never forget the look of surprise that had appeared on his face.

Now the priests were asking him to kiss his bride. He did, remembering the first time in the deserted tower.

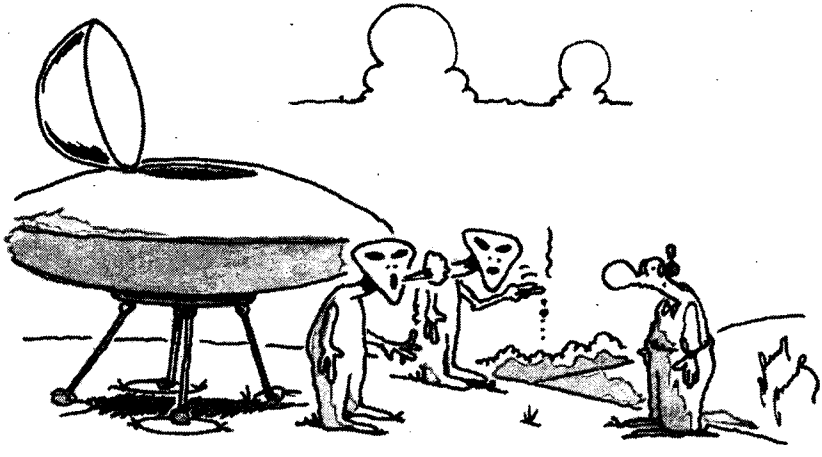
The ceremony ended. No one applauded, as was the custom; his parents and the priests murmured a few words of congratulations and left.

Charming picked up his bride — she had grown no heavier in the years — and carried her to his rooms. He laid her on the bed.

"Careful," she said, and he remembered that she had told him that she had never had a lover, that her father had guarded her close.

Gently, very gently, he undid her dress. He ran his hands over her dry flesh, her shriveled breasts. "Don't worry," he said. "I promised I wouldn't hurt you."

Outside, rain pattered against the window.



"We can't smoke on our planet."

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Fire Logic, by Laurie J. Marks, Tor Books, 2002, $25.95.

Earth Logic, by Laurie J. Marks, Tor Books, 2004, $25.95.

AFTER A hundred-plus installments, regular readers of this column probably know my complaints about high fantasy by heart, having heard them so often, but for anyone new to the argument, let me briefly reiterate:

Over the past few decades, writers of what's marketed as high fantasy appear to have taken for their books the inspiration of the big battles one finds in Tolkien, the background coloring of magical beings and talismans, but ignored the sense of wonder that drew so many readers to the field in the first place. These days high fantasy novels are not much more than war novels, with battalions of orcs and elves in the place of human army divisions, their presence making it a "magical" book.

In fact, while these books have the look of Tolkien about them, they're much closer in spirit to what used to be called heroic fantasy, or sword and sorcery.

Now whether this is due to a nostalgia for the golden days of my youth, and the artistic endeavors that created excitement for me then (the way, for many of us, the music of our teen years forever retains a warm glow), or a true lack of variety, I find myself constantly missing the way the fantasy field was when I first discovered it in the seventies.

There weren't as many books available, true, but they were all different. When you started a book, you had *no idea* where it would take you. What you did know was that it would go someplace you hadn't been before. And it would deliver that sense of wonder — the little buzz of the impossible made real that you don't find in a mainstream book.

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(This was helped, perhaps, by the fact that there weren't as many contemporary authors writing fantasy at the time, so to fill their lines, publishers went back and ransacked the vast library of books published earlier, before there even were genre designations. It's not too hard to have a varied line when you have a century or so of already published books to draw on.)

But the real point I should have been making all along is that what annoys me isn't so much the books themselves, but how they're marketed as high fantasy when they're clearly not. I don't know who's to blame for this — the publishers, the writers themselves, their agents — but we get series after series foisted off on us that have all the grit of secular combat, but none of the heart of one of the great Romances, and certainly a lack of wonder. But they call it high fantasy nevertheless. In these books we'll find battles and campaigns and political maneuvering, but no marvels invoking awe and mystery. The marvels in most high fantasy these days are merely fancy weapons, or a special kind of warrior whose racial background (elf, troll, whatever) makes him or her a one-of-a-kind heroic figure.

So, really, my argument has been unfair, comparing apples to oranges, and the only reason it ever came up is because of genre designations. If they'd called it "military fantasy," I'd have had no cause to complain.

The other point I should make — which has probably been obvious to many of you all along — is that there have been any number of wonderful military fantasies published to date, and no doubt there will be many more.

Laurie J. Marks's books are a perfect example. Or at least the first volume *Fire Logic* certainly is, although interestingly enough, while she is working on an exemplary model of a war fantasy series (I know there are only two so far, but one assumes there will at least be volumes with "air" and "water" in their titles), by the second book, she's already subverting the conventions I've laid out for a war fantasy novel and slipping in...a sense of wonder.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Fire Logic introduces the land of Shaftal, a peaceable kingdom where at one time elemental witches, with their powers for healing, truth, joy, and intuition, were revered. Now the land is under the yoke of a conquering army of Sainnites, and the Shaftali have

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become guerrilla warriors, harrying the marauders.

A quartet of characters share the main stage: the Paladin Emil, a fire elemental who would rather study and collect old books than lead a company of guerrillas against the Sainnites; Zanja na'Tarwein, another fire elemental, an emissary of the mountain-dwelling Ashawal'ai, who learns that her remote tribe is in danger from the invaders, but can't convince them of it; Karis, a giant blacksmith and rare earth elemental who could defeat the Sainnites and lead her people into a peaceable future if she weren't addicted to a deadly drug; and Norina, the air elemental Truthkin who can see through any lie, but is blind to the dangers that lie in wait for her charge Karis.

Fire Logic is definitely a novel of war and intrigue — both of which can fuel drama in the most common novel (for there's not much that's more dramatic on an immediate level), but Marks's book is anything but common. And while the military aspects are certainly integral to the storyline and the entwining lives of her characters, Marks spends as much time delving into the wonderfully complex and messed-up inner lives of her characters, in prose that never gets in the way of the story but is still stylistically gorgeous.

And most intriguingly, about two thirds of the way into the book, the low-key magical facets of her characters' elemental magics rise away from simply being fancy "weapons" and evoke — for both the readers *and* the characters — that elusive sense of wonder cited above.

The book ends satisfyingly. Yes, there are unfinished threads, but it is a real novel with a beginning, middle, and end. You're not compelled to read the next one in cliffhanger terms, but I can't imagine anyone not wanting to do so.

Earth Logic picks up with the characters from the first book, but adds into the mix sections from the viewpoints of some of the Sainnite characters, in particular the half-Sannite philosopher and fire elemental Medric (first introduced in the earlier book and now allied with that novel's core group of characters), and Lieutenant-General Clement, a female officer of the Sainnite forces in Shaftal.

The military aspect is still present, but it's complicated by a deadly plague that doesn't distinguish between Sainnite and Shaftali. Marks doesn't take the easy way out by having them come together

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in brotherhood to combat this menace. Her solution is a longer, stranger, and far more complicated story than that, though the climax, when it does come, evokes that elusive sense of wonder again, rather than military might.

The whole feel of the book is emotionally larger and mythic, and the latter isn't due simply to the Native American-like fables that introduce each of the book's five parts. It infuses the whole of the novel, particularly those sections from the viewpoints of the Shaftali characters, which play wonderfully against the common sense, on-the-front-lines of the main Sainnite, Lieutenant-General Clement.

By this second book, the series has gained an overall title—*Elemental Logic*—which appears to promise more stories to come. And since the second volume plays as fair as the first (it's a complete novel, of and by itself), and is, if anything, even better written than the first, I'm certainly looking forward to what Marks comes up with next. We might have to wait another two years for the next one, but it will be worth the wait.

I've spent some time on these two books (with one of them being older than I'd normally consider covering in this column) for two simple reasons. The first is easy: they're two of the best books I've read in a very long time. The second is because it gave me a chance to address this whole idea of military fantasy from a different side than I have in the past. The lessons are twofold as well: one should never generalize, and no matter how much you think you don't read a certain kind of book, there are always going to be examples that transcend your expectations.

The trick is figuring out which ones they are, because many of the novels marketed as high fantasy really are just military books with a vague fantasy element that is often played up more on the cover than it will be anywhere inside the actual pages.

Dead Witch Walking, by Kim Harrison, Harper Torch, 2004, $6.99.

Now that I've just said we shouldn't generalize, Kim Harrison's debut novel is what I think of as a "mundaning of magic" book, by which I mean it sets up a world (often very like our own) where magic, or at least magical beings, are so common that they're interchangeable with the "real world." If you have a headache, you take a

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potion instead of a painkiller. Vampires, witches, and the like walk shoulder to shoulder with ordinary people, and everyone is often aware of the other.

For touchstones, think of Glen Cook's Garrett books, or novels by Tanya Huff, Charlaine Harris, or even Terry Pratchett, since there is often an undercurrent of humor, if not outright wisecracking and silly situations involved.

These sorts of books also owe a debt to the mystery genre, since many of them feature private eyes, or "ordinary" people solving mysteries, frequently murder. (I put "ordinary" in parentheses because the narrator/PI is often a witch, or a vampire, or something of that sort.)

In other words, the concept of a sense of wonder doesn't exist because the magic is too common and spread too broadly across the playing field.

It doesn't bother me, though.

Mostly it's because the book is marketed fairly. It's made obvious that these books aren't pretending to be anything other than what they are: fun, often exciting forays into some strange mishmash world of mystery and fantasy.

Harrison posits a world like our own, but one in which magical beings have been outed and now live in a somewhat uneasy association with more ordinary people. The mundane world is policed by the Federal Inderland Bureau (and what do you know, we end up with a play on a familiar acronym), the magical by Inderland Security (IS).

Rachel Morgan is a witch who works for the IS, but quits on the night that opens the book because she feels that someone in the office is undermining her ability to get clean arrests, never mind decent cases. Another IS operative, the vampire Ivy Tamwood, quits with her and they go into partnership as PIs along with a pixy named Jenks.

But the IS just doesn't like its operatives to quit. Ivy is able to buy out her contract with them, but Rachel can't, so she ends up on the IS's hit list. She realizes that the only way to stay alive is to bring the IS a bust so spectacular that they'll have to let her out of her contract. But that's hard to do with every kind of assassin — from fairies to demons — out to collect the bounty on her.

Dead Witch Walking isn't a Big Think book, but it's fast-paced and loads of fun — the perfect read when you want to just get away from things for a bit and vicariously live the life of someone a lot worse off than you, but who views the

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world and its problems through the prism of a quick-witted wiseacre.

Gothic Wine, by Darren Speegle, Aardwolf Press, 2004, $14.95.

All art is subjective, but the visual arts are so immediate — most often they wire directly into our brains through our eyes, without reason even getting a chance to consider the impressions we're receiving — that we tend to have strong, impulsive reactions to them. That said, to this reader, *Gothic Wine* has a truly cheesy cover that in no way conveys the elegance of the prose to be found on the pages inside. If I hadn't read the book in a coverless format, I'd have been hard pressed to actually open it.

I wasn't familiar with Darren Speegle before reading this first collection of his, so if I had let myself judge it by its cover, I would have missed a real treat.

I get the impression that Speegle was born outside of Europe and moved there, specifically to Germany, later in life — perhaps in his twenties or thirties. The reason I bring this up is that the stories here are all infused with that wonderful enthusiasm for new surroundings — the landscape and people, and their history — with a loving attention to detail that one wouldn't necessarily get from a native writer. Often, we take our home turf too much for granted and only see it with proper respect through a newcomer's eyes.

Or, as in the case of a non-European reader reading *Gothic Wine*, we get to view a new setting through particularly Romantic eyes.

The wine country in which Speegle sets many of his stories sounds wonderful — except for the dangerous and weird things awaiting the unsuspecting visitor in its shadows. All of which makes for very fine reading. But while this is an exquisite collection of literate and evocative stories — opening up a window into a fascinating, if eerie, Europe — I suspect that we should only visit these wineries, old churches, and grape fields in the pages of Speegle's collection. That way we stand a better chance of surviving to read his next one.

If your local bookstore doesn't carry this book, you can try ordering it directly from *www.aardwolfpress.com*.

Story Time, by Edward Bloor, Harcourt, 2004, $17.

Although he has a couple of previous novels under his belt

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(Crusader and the award-winning *Tangerine)*, Edward Bloor is a new writer for me. I discovered him the way I do most of my new writers: the book arrived in my P.O. box and I opened it to the first page and read a bit to see what it was like.

Yes, I do actually look at all the books that arrive. Unfortunately, I can't possibly read or review them all, but they all get that test of my trying the first page, only stopping when I get bored.

In the case of *Story Time*, that just didn't happen.

It starts with the irrepressible teenager Kate Peters and her Uncle George (who's actually two years younger than she), practicing a flying number from *Peter Pan* in their backyard on a device invented by George. George is a genius and he's just been accepted by the Whittaker Magnet School for kids like him. But through the strange shifting of school zones that the Whittaker Magnet School seems to be able to set into motion, Kate has to go as well.

It's a horrible place, dedicated to having and maintaining the highest test scores in the nation. To accomplish this, every class — and they're held in dreary, windowless rooms in the basement of the Whittaker building, the other eight floors of which are taken up by a library — consists solely of the students taking tests. They're not actually learning anything except how to do well on tests.

Kate hates it, of course, because she's been looking forward all summer to attending a regular public school and hoped to get the lead role in the school's upcoming *Peter Pan* production. So she starts to snoop, to see if she can find a way out, and ends up learning far more than she bargained for:

Mysterious deaths, haunted books...the Whittaker Building isn't any more safe than it is cheerful.

Bloor writes with a breezy, irreverent wit. Many of the characters — mostly the villainous ones — are broad caricatures, but they're still amusing, and he makes up for their single dimensions with Kate's personality and a number of other colorful characters, such as the librarian who only speaks in nursery rhymes, or Kate's grandparents who spend their every spare moment practicing clog dancing.

Like *Dead Witch Walking*, it's hardly a Big Think novel, but certainly enjoyable from start to finish.

It's a Bird... by Steven T. Seagle & Teddy Kristiansen, Vertigo, 2004, $24.95.

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What's probably most unusual about this book is that it's a Superman title being published by Vertigo, DC's edgier line that specializes in material that's pretty much the antithesis of traditional superhero comics. But then, Superman's only on the periphery of the main storyline, and he's a fictional character, as well. (I know; he's fictional in his own comics, but you know what I mean.)

Instead, the story focuses on a comic book writer who has been given the plum assignment of writing a Superman comic, but unlike his contemporaries, he has no interest in doing so. What follows is a meditation on what the realities of an alien such as the Superman character existing in the real world would be, intermingled with a tangle of memories and fears centering around the writer's struggle with Huntington's Disease, a debilitating genetic muscle disorder that has incapacitated a number of his relatives, and one that he fears he will one day contract himself.

Along the way we're treated to the writer's interactions with his editor, a fellow writer, his girlfriend, and various members of his family, including his father who has inexplicably gone missing.

It's a Bird... is apparently a semi-autobiographical story, and with it, Seagle delivers a moving portrait of the complicated processes an artist must go through to create his art and make sense of the confusion of everyday life.

Kristiansen's art is a treat, perfectly suiting the wry delivery of the story with panels that range from realistic to almost-caricature.

The two have worked together before (most notably in *House of Secrets*, also for Vertigo), but this is without a doubt their most ambitious and successful collaboration to date.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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BOOKS

ROBERT K.J. KILLHEFFER

White Devils, by Paul McAuley, Tor, 2004, $25.95.

The Zenith Angle, by Bruce Sterling, Del Rey, 2004, $24.95.

Forty Signs of Rain, by Kim Stanley Robinson, Bantam, 2004, $25.

A FEW months back I re-read John Brunner's classic eco-disaster novel *The Sheep Look Up* (reissued in 2003 by BenBella Books). It had been twenty years since I first read it, and I was struck by its intensity, the passion and urgency with which Brunner addressed the environmental concerns that had become an insistent cultural theme in those days (and remain so in ours). I was surprised by the firm, even extreme, position Brunner took on the issues. He hedged no bets and pulled no punches. This was the sf novel as eco-political tract.

What different days those were — 1972, the activist energy of the '60s still glowing like embers on the world's hearth, sf in the midst of its golden age of social consciousness, tackling subjects like war, racism, gender relations, colonialism. Those years gave us Harry Harrison's *Make Room, Make Room!* (1966), Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and "The Word for World Is Forest" (1972), Joe Haldeman's *The Forever War* (1974), Joanna Russ's "When It Changed" (1972) and *The Female Man* (1975).

Heady times.

I grew up reading this radical, visionary stuff, and sometimes I miss the heat and the energy — the full-throttle engagement with the issues, the unabashed challenging of the status quo — that marked some of the best sf of that era. Of course, sf writers continue to address the socio-political issues of the times, but the times have changed, and with them the style

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and tone of sf's handling of such topics. Social issues rarely form the center of sf novels today, the way they did in *The Sheep Look Up* — matters like the corporate domination of the world economy, the extinction of endangered species, and relations between rich nations and poor often shape the background against which the action takes place, but seldom become the focus or driving force of the action itself.

Take a look, for example, at Paul McAuley's latest novel, *White Devils*. McAuley began his career with well-crafted space operas *(Four Hundred Billion Stars, Eternal Light)*, and he has made his greatest impression so far with the epic far-future trilogy *Confluence*, but his more recent novels *(The Secret of Life, Whole Wide World)* have had a near-future setting in which some grappling with today's social problems becomes almost inevitable. *White Devils* takes place about thirty years from now in an Africa that's in even worse shape than it is today. It suffers from the widespread war and post-colonial dysfunction that afflict much of the continent now, and that instability has made it the favorite locale of experimenters on the further fringes of genetic engineering.

Young, idealistic Nicholas Hyde works for Witness Green Congo, digging up mass graves and documenting atrocities from the still-simmering Congolese civil war, but the first "hot scene" he's called to investigate turns out to be the work of something other than sadistic soldiers. Hyde's team has hardly begun to study the scene before it's attacked by a band of hairless white ape-like things, monsters with an unnatural ferocity, speed, and "bony or cartilaginous plates" under their skin that could only be the product of laboratory engineering.

Nick survives the attack, and saves a baby from the massacre site, which makes him suddenly a minor celebrity in the world media. But Obligate, the multinational corporation that effectively controls the Congo, doesn't want the truth about what happened to Nick's team to get out. They're blaming rebel soldiers and eliminating all the evidence of the "white devils" — including anyone who knows more than they should. Only Nick's media profile keeps him safe long enough to escape from the Congo in pursuit of the secret of the white devils, which he's determined to discover and reveal to the world.

McAuley's got a talent for openings, and the first several chapters

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of *White Devils* grab hold so well that they just about propel the reader through the rest of the book. And that's good, because somewhere in the middle the plot goes a bit slack. The first half of the book maintains a keen sense of plausibility — the attack by the white devils, the glimpses of life in the Congo, the science of gene splicing and cloning, it's all handled with convincing detail that overcomes the predictability of the corporate-coverup scheme. The second half of the book, however, spends all too much time on cartoonishly malevolent characters like the foppish safari entrepreneur Raphael and the Christian fundamentalist mercenary Cody Corbin. Still, there are scattered throughout some very fine moments, such as the encounter with Raphael's ragged, pitiable engineered saber-toothed tiger — a perfect encapsulation of the inevitable gap between genetic engineering's promises and its products.

Scattered throughout also are observations on a wide variety of social issues — the neo-colonialism of multinational corporations, America's obsession with guns, the enforced conformity of corporate culture. None of these issues becomes the center of the novel, but the commentary can be quite cutting nonetheless:

> The camp is such a wonderful advertisement for Obligate's philanthropy that there are rumors it will be made permanent.... The refugees work for a guaranteed minimum wage, stitching Obligate's Lotek sneakers and clothing, assembling slates and phones, carving Rainforest toys and masks, and rolling Rainforest cigarettes.... The camp provides everything but the dignity of self-determination for its inhabitants; none of the video diaries or documentaries mention the crippling rates of alcoholism, abortion, and suicide, the skirmishes between rival gangs, or the occasional, brutally suppressed riots.

Even when it's as clear in its condemnation as this, though, the treatment of social issues feels different from that of *The Sheep Look Up* and the novels of that time. It's not just that the issues remain firmly in the background, glimpsed like bypassed train stations as the plot moves steadily along. Despite Nick's determination to resist Obligate's pressure and get the story

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of the white devils out, the predominant mood of the novel is one of resignation. In the very first scene, Nick's boss tries to dampen Nick's hopes of tracking the perpetrators of atrocities: "This isn't a murder investigation," he tells Nick. "We're not here to bring anyone to justice. All we can do is speak for the dead. Document how they were murdered, try to find out their names and their stories, and if nothing else give them a decent burial."

That's the feeling we get about all the evils on display in *White Devils* — that the best we can hope to do is play witness, to document the horrors, not to prevent them. Maybe that's the awful truth. If so, then although the world McAuley depicts seems not nearly as grim as Brunner's, *White Devils* is a much bleaker book.

With his previous novel, *Zeitgeist* (2000), Bruce Sterling moved away from the unquestionably science-fictional into less easily definable territory, and in the process he established himself as one of the sharpest chroniclers of the contemporary cultural landscape. *The Zenith Angle* continues that transformation. It might not be science fiction at all — and yet, imbued as it is with Sterling's characteristic density of ideas and his fondness for the geeky details of computer networks and security issues, it certainly feels like some kind of sf. As Neal Stephenson did in *Cryptonomicon*, Sterling evokes the true strangeness of the technologies that are with us right now, and makes our own world seem more than a little alien.

The Zenith Angle begins (after a brief prologue) on September 11, 2001, with cyber-security expert Derek Vandeveer ("Van") happily ensconced as the VP for Research and Development at the New Jersey telecommunications company Mondiale, making "a weird amount of money" as Mondiale rides the tail-end of the dot-com boom. His astrophysicist wife, Dottie, commutes to her lab in Boston, and they've got a new baby and a Swedish au pair to help take care of him. Van's got all the funding and equipment his computer-nerd heart could desire. Life is good. And then he watches the planes hit the World Trade Center towers.

Caught up in the post-attack horror, Van joins the Coordination of Critical Information Assurance Board, a new commission set up by the National Security Council to plan the government's computer security measures. Dottie takes a

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job at an observatory in Colorado, and the demands of Van's new position make it nearly impossible for them to see each other. Mondiale's stock implodes in a scandal of fraud, taking Van's wealth (and much of his remaining innocence) with it. In a few short months, Van's life has fallen apart.

The bulk of the plot revolves around Van's attempt to repair a malfunctioning spy satellite, and the high-tech espionage that he uncovers in the process. But the heart of the novel lies in Van's emotional journey back from the rage and disillusion that engulf him while he's in Washington — and in the electrified screeds Sterling packs into every crevice of the narrative. Sterling expertly captures the feelings, the language, and the style of the dot-com boom, and just as capably conveys the shock and devastation wrought by the Bubble's sudden crash. "It was hard to believe — Van would never have imagined it — but Mondiale, the mighty Mondiale, was dot-bombing.... This brave, heroic, visionary, cutting-edge company — the bear market was beating it to death like a cheap toy piñata."

As Van slides from jejune optimism into depths of anger, self-doubt, and despair, and then works his way back to a wiser state of relative happiness, Sterling takes every opportunity to drop in nuggets of penetrating observation and opinionated rant on a variety of issues — superheated rhetoric reminiscent of his *Cheap Truth* days.

On computer science: "Computer science was a fraud. It always had been. It was the only branch of science ever named after a gadget."

On terrorism: "Terrorists didn't fight wars. The whole point of terrorism was to kick a government so hard, in so tender and precious a spot, that the government went nuts from rage and fear. Then the machinery of civilization would pour smoke from the exhaust. It would break down. Back to the tribes and the sermons, the blessed darkness of a world without questions."

On the truth: "No, kid, the truth does not win. For a couple of quarters the truth gets somewhere maybe. If everybody's real excited. But never in the long run, never.... The common wisdom always wins. Consensus, perception management, and the word on the Street. The markets, kid, the machine."

The cumulative effect of these analyses — incisive as they are — is a sense of resignation not unlike that in *White Devils*. "It didn't matter how good you were, how

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smart you were," Van reflects. "Nobody ever 'fixed' computers. You just threw the old computer out and got another one. Any genuine reform was impossible." Sterling likens the wild dream of the Internet boom to the space race of the '60s, with emphasis on the bitter aftermath. "It was a tremendous, wrenching effort in pursuit of the sublime. People aiming for the Moon, touching it for a golden moment, and being left with massive bills and rusting gantries."

Like McAuley, Sterling may be revealing hard-learned truths here. And he may well have given us the definitive novel of the dot-com disaster, his generation's cultural midlife crisis. But it's difficult not to wish for something, even a hint, to balance the pervasive sense of exhaustion and retreat. Perhaps it's too soon — perhaps we'll have to wait for the hangover to pass before we can expect to see another burst of idealistic energy, another pursuit of the sublime. Let's hope we don't have to wait very long.

Kim Stanley Robinson's new novel, *Forty Signs of Rain*, centers on the preeminent environmental issue of our times — global warming, the perfect analog to pollution in the '60s and '70s — and it's a surprising, even peculiar book. It's frightening, as any consideration of impending catastrophe must be, but in a quieter, more theoretical way than a conventional disaster story. For one thing, the disaster doesn't fully strike during the course of the story. (This is the first volume of a trilogy, so things will probably get worse in the next installment.) More importantly, Robinson isn't so much interested in stoking our fears as he is in rallying us to action.

The book begins a few years in the future — five, ten, hard to say exactly — and the signs of climate change have grown somewhat more insistent, but life in the United States (and most other places) goes on essentially unchanged. The U.S. government continues to respond as it does today, downplaying the evidence, emphasizing the uncertainty of scientific prediction, opting for cosmetic half-measures over any ambitious program to address the problem. The first chapter opens with the humdrum domestic routines of the Quiblers — Anna, head of the Bioinformatics Division at the National Science Foundation, and her husband Charlie, climate advisor to Senator Phil Chase, currently working from home while he takes care of their toddler son, Joe.

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There's lots of talk about the awful consequences of climate change, both at the NSF and in Charlie's work for the senator, but it's clear early on that Robinson is not interested in the melodrama of a standard disaster novel.

Forty Signs of Rain is more concerned with examining the culture of science in the U.S., and why it has failed to produce the political action that its research clearly supports. In fact, the novel can be read as Robinson's analysis of that problem, and his prescription for change. Anna Quibler and, more stridently, one of her program directors, Frank Vandewaal, argue that scientists, and organizations like the NSF, need to become more activist, more opinionated, more outspoken in debates on public policy. "All that basic research, all that good work," Anna muses, reflecting on the history of the NSF, "and yet — thinking over the state of the world — somehow it had not been enough. Possibly they would have to consider doing something more."

Frank puts it in much stronger terms: "The world is in big trouble and NSF is one of the few organizations on Earth that could actually help get it out of trouble, and yet it's not. It should be charting worldwide scientific policy and *forcing* certain kinds of climate mitigation and biosphere management, *insisting on them* as emergency necessities, it should be working Congress like the fucking NRA to get the budget it deserves...."

Like Sterling, Robinson fills his text with mini-lectures, and not only on climate change. His riffs cover topics such as evolutionary psychology, traffic jams, the widening gap between rich and poor, game theory, the challenges facing the development of medical therapies from biotechnology. And his commentary hits as hard as anything in *White Devils*: "[The administration's] line was that no one knew for sure and it would be much too expensive to do anything about it even if they were certain it was coming...so they were going to punt and let the next generation solve their own problems in their own time. In other words, the hell with them. Easier to destroy the world than to change capitalism even one little bit."

There's no whiff of resignation in *Forty Signs of Rain* — unless it's in the fact that Robinson recognizes that the unfashionability of '60s-style activism may be the most significant challenge to enacting significant change. Where Brunner wrote with unrestrained prophetic

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fire, Robinson knows he's writing at a different time, in a much different cultural context. So he proceeds more cautiously, building up slowly to his call for scientific activism, acknowledging all along the arguments and instincts that might make it hard to accept.

Surveying the capsule history of the NSF on its web site, Anna notes a program from the 1960s called "Interdisciplinary Research Relevant to Problems of Our Society," and her first thought is, "What a name from its time that was!" But then she pauses to reconsider. "[C]ome to think of it, the phrase described very well what Anna had had in mind.... Interdisciplinary research, relevant to problems of our society — was that really such a sixties joke of an idea?"

With such steps, Robinson seeks to rehabilitate the activist spirit that gave us *The Sheep Look Up* and works like it — and, more importantly, gave us the Clean Air Act and measures like it. And Robinson makes his case without neglecting the other necessary aspects of a satisfying novel. His characters are convincingly idiosyncratic, and their emotional lives receive almost as much attention as their intellectual musings. The cracking of Frank's bitter cynicism is all the more moving because Robinson accomplishes it without devaluing Frank's dedicated rationalism. *Forty Signs of Rain* is a fascinating depiction of the workings of science and politics, and an urgent call for us to pull our heads from the sand and confront the threat of climate change. We should listen.

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Michael Kandel works nowadays as an editor for the Modern Language Association, but when he worked as an editor for Harcourt Books, he published novels by Patricia Anthony and Jonathan Lethem, to name but two. He himself is the author of several novels, including Strange Invasion, Captain Jack Zodiac, *and* Panda Ray, *and he is also well-known for his translations of Stanislaw Lem's work. His current project is editing an anthology of monster stories translated from Polish. "Time to Go" is a terrific example of Mr. Kandel's deadpan delivery and biting wit.*

Time to Go

By Michael Kandel

1

AUNT BESSIE TOLD ME TO go pick up Uncle Carmine for the wedding.

"It would be nice if he could make it," she said.

"No problem," I said.

"Well, I don't know," she said. "He's Jane's great-great."

"Jane Belcher?"

"Jane who was Prissie's great. Prissie who was Bob's mom. Bob Senior."

I did a little mental arithmetic and whistled. "He must be over a mil."

"It would be nice," she said with a half sigh. "Family roots and all that. Mother Cora would like to see him. Do your best."

"Sure," I said.

Why did I always get these kinds of jobs?

* * *

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2

Uncle Carmine looked fine. Not a wrinkle on him. No blemishes or blotches to speak of. He obviously kept in shape and had his repair work done regularly.

"Who are you again?" he laughed, clapping me on the arm and shaking my hand. Quite a grip.

I explained that I was Tricia's grandson. The Philadelphia Tricia.

He nodded, waved whatever. "Good to see you, Jim," he said.

"Tim," I said.

"Tim. Right."

I couldn't fault him. In the new order, we are saddled with so many families, so many relations. I'm only in my hundreds and already I have trouble keeping them straight without clicking through a database. It's the serial marriages that do it, the different instant sets of in-laws.

"Barb and Deke are tying the knot," I told him. "Barb's a Hotchkiss. The Seattle Hotchkisses? She's a great-grand after Martha — the actress. The one who married President Gaylor. The Gaylor who was shot."

Uncle Carmine said, "Ah." He was being polite; I knew he wasn't even trying to follow.

"Deke's from France," I said.

"Good country," said Uncle Carmine. "I lived there several times."

"No kidding."

"I've lived everywhere several times."

He got a tired look, so I quickly said something interesting: "They're a young couple. Only the fifteenth time for her, only the eighteenth for him."

"How sweet," said Uncle Carmine, somewhat interested. Innocence is always a grabber.

"You were invited a couple of months ago," I reminded him.

"I get a lot of wedding invitations," he said with an absent smile.

"I bet." I do too, actually, and I'm only in my hundreds. "Barb's planning on having a kid, and it'll be her first."

"Her first," said Uncle Carmine. "No shit." He was mildly impressed.

A first time for anything is news, in the new order.

* * *

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3

But before we could leave, the old guy had to have his pint with the regulars at the Regulator. Part of his routine. All the staff were from Ireland (the real Ireland), and all the walls were paneled with authentic oak. In dim light, the obligatory Rubensish recumbent nude hung over the obligatory row of dusty single malts.

I was introduced to Ho Hum, who told me he was five thou as if it were an achievement. Some childishness we never outgrow, I guess. The last thing he did to keep himself awake was bank robbing. Now he was into art history. Etruscan.

"Contrast," he said, winking. "That's my method. Contrast."

"If you don't change gears," observed another regular, Same Old, "you rust."

"Here's to rust," said Uncle Carmine. "Arf arf." And he chugged a respectable quantity of sudsy golden ale.

"Myself I don't see the point of crime," said Been There, "but hey, what works for you works for you." He was doing medical research, cis-trans molecules.

I could relate to research. Science didn't get stale as quickly as most things in this vale. My bag at the moment was radio astronomy. A challenging bag that. The math is killer.

Same Old told me he relied these days on religion, meditation, and good works. That was his gear change from sexual perversions.

I was saving sexual perversions for the next century. Looking forward, but then, hey, I was a callow youth.

Funny how we always get on the same subject: survival. I looked at us in the mirror. Five gentlemen quaffing. Not one gray hair among us. Physically, if you didn't look into the eyes, we could have been brothers.

4

The discussion, predictably, turned to those who hadn't made it. Who had fallen. Death invariably draws, as a subject.

"Charlie was in the movies," said Same Old.

"I love the movies," said Ho Hum.

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"Yeah, but there are only so many times you can see *The Maltese Falcon*."

"True."

"They were filming in Curaçao, an operetta with bestiality and dancing Hungarians, and he just, you know, folded."

"I know."

"You have to know when to fold 'em," said Uncle Carmine.

"I never cared for Charlie," said Been There, half to himself. "The man was a little too on the surface."

"The surface is good," I said. "It's safe."

They all looked at me, so I stepped back apologetically and shut up.

"Here's to Charlie," said Uncle Carmine, raising his glass, and they followed suit, with a moment of silence.

"Sheba," said Ho Hum. "She was into armadillos. I loved her."

"We all loved her," said Same Old.

"Yes, we did, didn't we?" said Been There sadly.

"Bare Sheba," said Uncle Carmine. "Arf arf."

They grunted and toasted her too, but then Been There fell. Just like that. Uncle Carmine moved deftly out of the way of the airborne ale. Long experience in bars.

"Son of a gun," remarked Same Old. "He didn't even say bye to his buddies."

Most people, when they pull the plug on themselves, don't say goodbye. Maybe they are in too much pain. Maybe it's like taking a leak, like running for the john when the awful urge comes. You don't have time for social amenities.

Ho Hum fell too, with a crash, leaving just the three of us. This did not bode well. I was beginning to doubt that I would get Uncle Carmine to the wedding. Aunt Bessie wouldn't be pleased. Mother Cora would be disappointed.

I hated being put in this position.

5

My dad pulled the plug on himself when I was eighty. He had kept himself going with politics and gardening, but everything palls after long

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enough. He said farewell in a fashion, called me over with a smile. It was at a reception for a diplomat dressed in Buddhist orange.

"Jim," he began.

"Tim," I corrected.

He shrugged and slumped in his chair, his handsome head to one side. A few canapes rolled from his lap to the floor. Smoked fish, as I recall. I closed his eyes for him, wondering what he had wanted to tell me before the weariness made him reach inside and stop the old ticker forever.

6

Philip Henley Carson III, born 3012 old order or BC (before Carson), was the genius we have to thank for the self-termination activator implanted in the medulla oblongata and looped to decision center 8B910 (a five-minute outpatient procedure requiring only a local anesthetic) in order to bypass the autonomic nervous system cardiopulmonarily in the event that the existential ennui in an individual reaches such a level of discomfort that it can morally and legally be termed inhuman suffering. Carson devised a clever combination of mental taking hold (the "kill switch" principle) and mental letting go (the "deadman's throttle" principle) that reduced the possibility of accidental or reckless-unintentional self-unplugging to almost zero (.00813).

As he wrote in his *Reflections* (which I've read only a few times), life without aging and without end might not be for everyone. "People come in all shapes and sizes," he liked to say. The escape clause that he provided for a few maladaptors, however, turned out to be what everyone, sooner or later, made use of. Without exception. The record, one million eight hundred two thousand and six hundred fifty-five years, was held by Bertie Gross. Mrs. Gross told the reporters only three years before her finish that she owed her longevity to a strict regimen of crossword puzzles, TV sitcoms, and yohimbine.

The failure of mindlifts and partial wipes — they were but patches, stopgaps — led to the universal adoption of the Carson Intervention. Carson himself was one of the first to take advantage of this option, which he did without warning, word, or gesture of farewell. He was 1,908. He left life halfway through a multiple orgasm ceremony on a mountaintop.

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7

Uncle Carmine's arf arf was getting on my nerves, but I tended to him with unrelentingly cheerful care. When he yawned, I would step in with a joke, amazing fact, or suggestion that he consider some lovely new idea or exciting activity. He would laugh, clap me on the back or head, and say, "Don't worry, Jimmy Boy, I'll make it."

He told me a story about Mother Cora, who is his stepgranddaughter once removed (I think). She was getting married but the guy turned out to be from another solar system. "I never saw her so mad," said Uncle Carmine.

"What, did he reveal his third eye?" I asked.

"No," said Uncle Carmine, "he was okay. Nice fellow. Problem was the sand in their bed."

"He liked to swim at the beach."

"No, he was silicon-based."

"No kidding."

"I don't have a problem with that myself. A little sand in the bed doesn't bother me. But Cora hit the ceiling."

"So you've had wives from other solar systems?"

"Sure. Wives, husbands."

"Silicon-based?"

"Silicon, chlorine, you name it."

"Chlorine?"

"The bed smells like a swimming pool. I'd wear goggles to avoid eye irritation."

"So what did Mother Cora do?"

"She broke it off. Which was a good thing, actually, because the guy was in debt up to his gills. Didn't pay his taxes either."

"He had gills?"

"Just a figure of speech."

"Did you ever have a wife with gills?"

"Sure. I've had all kinds. My advice, when you get married, Jimmy Boy, ask to see a financial statement first. Audited and notarized. I'm telling you, it saves a lot of grief."

I nodded. Truth was, I had been stung that way already. The undisclosed lien on Vanessa's wherry. The first Vanessa, with the hair.

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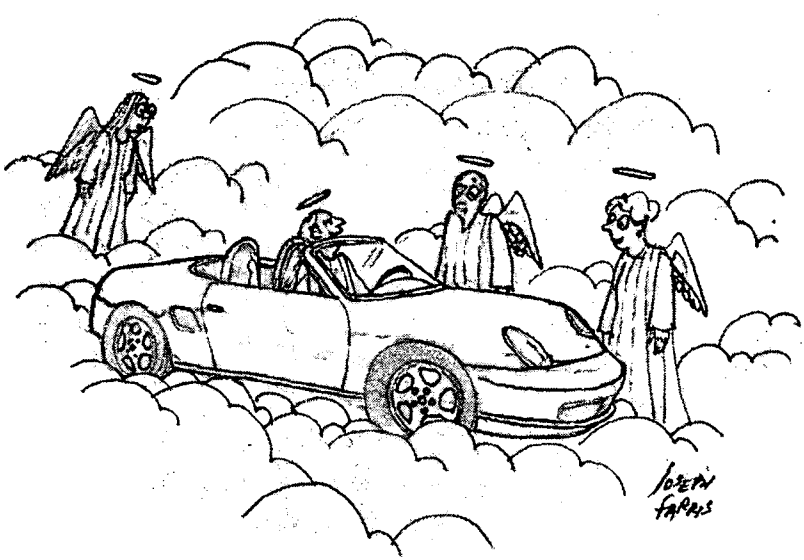
8

The wedding went smoothly, no problems. Aunt Bessie thanked me twice for fulfilling my mission successfully, Tricia came over and kissed me on the forehead, Barb and Deke made a big deal about the "honor" and had a bunch of pictures taken with Uncle Carmine, and Mother Cora and Uncle Carmine enjoyed a nice little heart to heart off in a corner on the veranda under the leaves of the big Cambodian poplar. About old times, I suppose. If anybody dropped dead now, it wouldn't be my fault. I sighed with relief, rattled the ice in my fragrant highball, and suddenly felt, in an awful wave, weary. Bone weary.



"My warranty stated I could take it with me."

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In general, F&SF *readers are probably familiar with Flann O'Brien's* The Third Policeman *and thus understand the value of a good footnote. Here we bring you a new tale of the Silurian age, one in a rather academic vein. Steven Utley reports that while the long-anticipated book of Silurian Tales is not yet in the works, a story collection entitled* The Beasts of Love *is in the pipeline and is expected to emerge next year.*

A Paleozoic Palimpsest

By Steven Utley

AS AFICIONADOS OF DOCUmentaries and attentive readers of Sunday supplements know, the Paleozoic expedition's main camp sits upon the verge of an estuarine marsh bracketed by barren headlands. Within the labyrinthine jumble of rocky debris along the base of the nearer ridge, a singular limestone slab stands as though balanced upon its edge in an area like a miniature arena. Unlike the camp's other points of interest, it is omitted from the official catalogue. Yet significant numbers of visitors to the Paleozoic eagerly negotiate the enclosing maze for the sake of inspecting it. Some few of these daring souls become lost, of course, and require extrication, occasionally by air (the camp maintains a helicopter for this purpose), while others wander through the maze and emerge without glimpsing that which they sought. (From time to time, guideposts and monitoring devices have been installed, but someone always removes or disables them. Attempts to identify and apprehend this vandal have failed.) Those who successfully penetrate the maze find themselves before an extrusion of vibrant red and orange, fluorescent yellow, metallic blue,

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shiny green: riotous, startling, illicit color — in marked contrast to the materially identical limestone masses ranged about it (indeed, to the drab Paleozoic world in general). The finely grained stone typical of the region provides a suitable, albeit slightly undulating, surface for a variety of more or less indelible markers, including paint sticks, grease pencils, jet pens, charcoal, and chalk, as well as pocketknives and other implements — according to one visitor, "You can scratch it with a paper clip, it's so soft."[1] Over the years, virtually the entire surface of the slab has been covered with markings, until "the rock is embedded in graffiti like the pit in a peach."[2] Much of the older graffiti has itself been deliberately obliterated, scrubbed off to make way for new graffiti or simply buried beneath fresh layers. Weathering and fading have also effaced many markings, moreover, at unequal rates, depending upon the graffiti's placement and the means used to inscribe it. In consequence, the beginnings of many inscriptions unconformably abut the middles of others and the endings of still others. "There can't be five unaltered independent clauses in the lot."[3] A geologist visiting the rock calls it "a perfect metaphor for geology. The old is obscured by the new, the new is partly erased, partly exposing the old."[4] No less proprietarily, an historian likens it to palimpsests, the parchments erased and reused by ancient and medieval scholars.

> The rock is porous enough to retain traces of erased or obscured graffiti, which become observable under ultraviolet light; images obtained in this manner become legible with a minimum of electronic enhancement. This process is, of course, beyond the means and intent of the casual visitor, who therefore must be content with superficial inspection.[5]

The graffiti consist of the usual things which people throughout history have privately inscribed in public places: names, initials, dates, jokes, bon mots, cartoons, declarations of love enclosed in hearts, invitations to engage in a variety of improbable sexual acts, mostly unsought

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[1] Poz (pseud.), *The Positronic Express* (India Ink).
[2] *Ibid.*
[3] *Ibid.*
[4] V. Thorp, *A Life Among the Rocks* (Endocarp).
[5] B. King, *Earth to Earth* (University of Tennessee).

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and mostly unsound advice, quotations, insults, non sequiturs, trivia, esoterica, outright arcana, and verse in various forms and of debatable merit. "The neighbor's sea scorpions are in the rosebushes again," begins one poem. "There was a young lady from Dallas," begins another. Perhaps inevitably, the enormous body of verse has inspired an attendant body of literary criticism, itself ranging in form and quality from the brief and facile "If it doesn't rhyme/don't waste my time" to a brambly critique of the works of seventeenth-century English poets John Donne, Richard Crashaw, George Herbert, and Abraham Cowley.[6]

An entire face of the slab is given over to a mass of graffiti consolidated under a heading painstakingly engraved by an unknown daredevil across the upper edge:

QUANTUM METAPHYSICS 101

A twenty-first-century humorist who had undertaken the "obligatory pilgrimage"[7] to the rock, noted in his own, farcical expedition memoir that

> the chief topic of the forum, if it may be said to possess such, was the interface of science and art or science and faith or science and something else. What you made of it depended on what you thought you knew about what other people had thought they knew and still other people had thought of what those first people thought. It was mathematics and metaphysics, morphology in both the biological and linguistic meanings of the word, metopes and modern art, Mozart and mo-pop, Mohammed and his mountain, Mann and *his* mountain, the "many-worlds" hypothesis (with monoversalists, multiversalists, and mimetoversalists biting at one another like cats, dogs, and fairly undiscriminating fleas), and ever so much more, all mashed into mush. If you looked away for an instant, if you so much as blinked, you lost your place and never could find it again.[8]

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[6] K. Colt, ed., *PaleozoInk* (Necessary Impurity). Perhaps no less inevitably, several collections of this verse have been published, including *PaleoPens*, *PaleoPoets*, and the aforesaid *PaleozoInk*, all edited by Colt, as well as a selection of the criticism, *PaleoPoisonPens*, edited by D. Stepp and also published under the aegis of Necessary Impurity.

[7] L. D. Yerly, *My Silurian Sleep-Over* (Orcas Island Publishing), the basis of the interminably running *Paleozoic Pajama Party!*

[8] *Ibid.*

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He discovers that disagreement over basic terms has prompted a graffitist to append "Essential and Other Pertinent Definitions,"

> in the interest of promoting agreement on what we are talking *about*. Let us all concur that *quantum theory* "holds that energy is not absorbed or radiated continuously but discontinuously, in definite units called *quanta*," while *metaphysics*, as used hereinafter, is intended to mean "the branch of philosophy that deals with first principles and seeks to explicate the nature of being or reality [here the viewer is advised by footnote to *see ontology*, further down the rock] and of the origin and structure of the world *[see cosmology]* and is closely associated with a theory of knowledge" *[see epistemology]*.[9]

Although, remarkably (indeed, almost uniquely), the text enclosed within its rectangular border remains inviolate (save for the insertion of several competing systems of footnote symbols), vehement dispute over the offered definitions provokes extensive annotation.

> I was inspired to admiration of the rock by my discovery upon it of an example of a literary form that surely dates back to Sumer and for all scientists can tell us even to the Paleolithic. Anyone who has ever entered a public restroom will recognize it. This example commenced, "S.Y.S. loves E. remipes" (S.Y.S. presumably being a paleontologist, E. remipes being an evidently popular species of sea scorpion), and proceeded as follows:
>
> *Better E. remipes than E. coli.*
>
> You know where you can put your E. coli!
>
> HEY, WATCH IT — MY DOG'S A BORDER COLI!
>
> *It's pronounced kohl-i, not cah-lee.*
>
> Drink Coca-Coli.
>
> I ALSO HAVE A PET VEGETABLE FROM THE COLI FAMILY. CAN YOU GUESS WHAT IT IS?
>
> Broccoli.
>
> *Coliflower*?
>
> **May Coli smite you all, jaw and thighbone, ass and elbow.**
>
> *If you ask me this whole discussion is pretty melancholi.*

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[9] *Ibid.*

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AND DID WE ASK YOU?

Well! I decided that if this was indicative of the material still awaiting my perusal, I could have it read in twenty minutes or half an hour at most. I confidently launched a frontal assault on that bastion of bewilderment titled "Quantum Metes&sychosis" *[sic]* and promptly had to skirt an impenetrable line of fortifications comprising quotations from works of metaphysics (some of them in the original German, and at least a few of the shorter ones lettered in Gothic script, rendering them all the more impervious to understanding) only to find myself under a barrage of denigrations of abstract reasoning and the small-arms fire of dissertations on the relative incidences of "solitary vice" and general depravity among philosophers, paleontologists, and physicists. I came to a dead stop in a concertina-wire-like tangle of mathematical formulae, through which I could glimpse a patch of text on the far side, though I could make out only the terms "atemporality" and "aspatiality," the lines,

Here I sit, broken-hearted,
Tried to quit
But can't get started,

and the desperate scrawl, "Help! I'm having a simultaneity breakdown!" Without understanding for an instant what that person was talking about, I believe I know exactly how he or she must have felt.[10]

Permitted, or compelled, to read only more or less at random, other visitors also mention the impossibility of syncretism, one going so far as to describe the graffiti as quaquaversal, a term in geology meaning "directed from a common center toward all points of the compass or turning and dipping in all directions."[11] Another observes that "these ostensibly serious exchanges inevitably degenerate into puerile nonsense," and reproduces as an example the following exchange:

Sirrah, you are a sorry sack of solipsism and a sciolistic one at that.

I micturate mightily on your meandering, monotonous, meaningless, and maximally moronic musings on mathematics.

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[10] *Ibid.*
[11] Thorp.

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Oh yeah?!

Yeah! Wanna make something of it?

FIGHT! FIGHT! OOOPS, I MEAN – SCIAMACHY! SCIAMACHY!

"To which," he says, "I confess I was sorely tempted to add *Quantum sufficit!* 'Enough already!'"[12] His collaborator springs to the defense:

> The graffiti are not puerile. They are at least sophomoric, and I am coming around to the view that they do serve a useful function — provide the expedition's anarchists and jokers with an outlet for anti-social and anti-authoritarian sentiment, and so keep them from bloodily overthrowing local Officialdom. Therefore, I can only say to my esteemed colleague, whose pomposity, humorlessness, and priggishness fit him ideally for membership in Officialdom, *Fac ut vivas!* "Get a life!"[13]

The graffiti have not lacked for either champions or detractors among expedition members, and, perhaps contrary to expectation, opinion is not divided strictly along the demarcation between its civilian and military members. A Navy officer describes a rather touching incident which, unknown to him at the time, was to have an unpleasant denouement:

> At midday, prickly heat engulfed the camp like amber, and people turned from the work or recreation that had occupied them throughout the morning and became, according to their natures, passive, lethargic, dormant, or perfectly inert. I was a newcomer, however, and this was my first time ashore, and I wanted to see everything. I put a pith helmet on my head, salt tablets in my pocket, and a canteen on my belt, and struck out into blinding sunlight and palpable humidity to seek such adventure as the Silurian age could provide. I did not feel like climbing the ridge in that heat, however. I had overheard someone on the ship say that there was "interesting stuff" to see among the rocks strewn along its base, so I decided to investigate.
>
> ...The going was tricky, but it was shady in there, and cool.... As I penetrated deeper, however, the air grew still; if I had been perspiring freely before, now I was awash inside my slimy clothes.

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[12] S. Nichols and O. Peabody, *Paleo Boys at Large* (Carlo).

[13] *Ibid.*

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Then I stepped through a cleft and came unexpectedly upon a woman standing beside a graffiti-plastered slab of rock. She faced me but didn't see me because at that moment she had the front of her shirt pulled up so she could wipe sweat from her face, thereby affording me an excellent view of her bare bosom. I almost dislocated a number of joints trying to get myself turned around within the cleft's confines. I stuck fast for the moment and could only shut my eyes and stammer an apology.

"It's okay," I heard her say, "you can look now, I'm decent."

I risked a look and saw her regarding me with an expression of annoyance. I felt like one big hot blush, and that seemed to amuse her, for she abruptly cocked her hip and planted a fist on it, gave me an exaggerated wink, and said, "Hell-o, sailor!"

Then *she* suddenly blushed, and I realized after a moment that she had just then recognized my insignia. "Whoops," she said, "sorry, I didn't realize," and now I finally found my voice and told her no, *I* was sorry, *I* hadn't realized, and we went on like that for perhaps half a minute. She laughed nervously and said, "Can we please just start over? Pretend we just this instant laid eyes on each other for the first time? That I never disconcerted you by blatantly calling attention to my womanly charms?"

"I'm not disconcerted by womanly charms," I said, and immediately thought, That must be the most inane sentence to come out of my mouth in my adult life. I tried to recoup by adding, "You'd be surprised by what a Navy chaplain hears."

She laughed again. "Probably not as much as you'd be surprised by what an old gal knows."[14]

Apparently in consequence of this flustered beginning, the two dispense with further attempts at introduction.

I asked about the graffiti, and after a moment's hesitation, she led me on a brisk circuit of the slab. "Every other rock in Paleozoic time," she said, "is regarded as the scientific equivalent of a holy relic, untouchable by the uninitiated. But this one's been singled out

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[14] G. Madiel, *Infinite Worlds, Eternal God: A Navy Chaplain's Exploits Elsewhere* (U.S. Naval Academy).

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for a different use — a profane use, if you will, but vital nevertheless. Here's where expedition members come to satisfy the hardwired human need to make marks on things." Much of what I saw was the usual, by turns blasphemous, merely outrageous, or simply cretinous, but here and there was something clever, such as the protracted dialog between Maxwell's demon and Schrödinger's cat ("MD: You okay in there? SC: You go to hell!"[15]). I hadn't seen the word "consubstantial" in a graffito since divinity school. I would have stayed longer, but I became increasingly aware that she meant only to satisfy my curiosity and send me on my way as quickly as possible, so I thanked her and returned through the maze to camp.[16]

The following morning, the commander of the expedition's Navy contingent ordered a work party to the rock. That much is indisputable; accounts of what precipitated the order, what the order was, and what came of it do not simply vary but diverge to the point of flatly contradicting one another. The chaplain ever after denied that he had reported the existence of the graffiti ("clearly it was an open secret"[17]), admitting only that he had mentioned it in passing to fellow officers. He also claimed that Dr. Maven had somehow never got around to explaining that she was studying the graffiti ("She just said she'd been taking pictures of it"[18]), and that he had had no intention of making trouble for her or anyone else. A historian who accepts this, or at least does not reject it, writes:

> The definition of vandalism includes graffiti, so the commander was simply enforcing regulations — *or* (already our path forks!) perhaps he was acting out of personal pique, having taken umbrage at either a vicious caricature of himself rumored to adorn the rock, *or* ribald verse directed at a civilian expedition member with whom he was known to be, *or* perhaps only rumored to have been, romantically involved, at some time, on some plane of being. *Or* not.[19]

[15] J. Friel, however, in his *Pastimes and Past Tenses* (Matthewave), reports the demon's half of the dialog as, "Whatcha doing in the box, kitty?" while Kalen Gilligan, in *Meanwhile, Back in the Past* (DeForgeo), gives the cat's reply as, "Wouldn't you like to know!" and Yerly, as, "That's for me to know and you to find out!"

[16] Madiel.

[17] *Ibid.*

[18] Record of Proceedings. See footnote [21], below.

[19] King.

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In one instance, the offensive verse is given as

I have the hots for Professor Heather,
Whom I'd like to dress in leather
And tickle, with a peacock feather.

In a "sub-instance" of this development, the Navy commander denounces the "despicable doggerel" and acts the part of a protective lover; in a second sub-instance, he denies any romantic attachment with the Professor Heather in question but feels it incumbent upon himself to act on her behalf. But (ah ha!) the commander may just as well have been acting on the pique of one of his junior officers, who took umbrage at ribaldry directed at herself:

The jay-gee is a sonsy wench;
I'd lay her on a bunk or bench.
If she liked, I'd even spank her,
But I'm an enlisted wanker.

The work party hasn't even received its assignment, already we have half a dozen different versions of things, and we're still well shy of the commander's ultimately being dissuaded from having the rock (A) cleaned off, (B) pulverized, or (C) simply declared off limits to (1) all expedition personnel or (2) Navy personnel only. To complicate matters further, no one is really sure just *how* he was dissuaded and *by whom*.[20]

In the event, one person, at least, was sure that she knew how and by whom — or, more precisely, if the imperfections of the Record of Proceedings[21] can be said to allow for precision, that she could certainly

[20] *Ibid.*

[21] Unfortunately, the medium used for the Record of Proceedings (and much else of expedition members' quotidian experience) was the unstable JGoldman10™, eventually replaced by MemoryMat™. "Worse," King notes, "Madeleine™, Mnemosyne™, and similar 'enhancers' had not then lived down their association with the infamous Psychepick™ and regained the confidence of historians. Thus, any account of events that occurred (perhaps it is safer to write 'may have occurred') in the expedition's first decades must necessarily be an assemblage of bits gleaned from a single unreliable artificial source and even less reliable, and too often self-serving, human remembrance. Contradictions accrete to this day, long after most of the principals have passed on.... The seeker of truth must exercise due caution when turning to the recollections of former expedition members, many of them demonstrably untrustworthy (especially those who have passed on!). Glaring discrepancies exasperate even the most dedicated researchers and tempt them to give credence to the theories of a twenty-first-century physicist

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find out. (It is difficult to explain this record's having been overlooked by King, whose reputation for meticulous research must now be reconsidered.) According to the Proceedings, the work party was met at the site and deflected from its assignment by a female civilian named Maven who claimed the graffiti as the subject of her sociological research. By now, no one should be surprised to learn that conflicting accounts ensue. The petty officer in charge of the work party later admitted in proceedings that he had skeptically demanded to know what a sociologist might be doing in Paleozoic time, and claimed that the civilian had lost her temper and sharply informed him that she had work to do, that the interview was concluded, and that the Navy should mind "its own goddamn business, whatever the hell that might be."[22] She maintained in proceedings that while she may have indeed been curt with the petty officer,[23] she had answered his "impertinent" question comprehensively and concisely: "I'm doing what sociologists do anywhere there are humans living together in social groups."[24]

In her published memoir of the expedition, however, she amplified this answer to make it more comprehensive, albeit less concise, presumably in the way of dramatizing exposition to make it more palatable to a

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whose now-fading fame rested upon his intimate connection with The Spacetime Anomaly — as he preferred to call it in his alleged autobiography, a work that bears so little resemblance to contemporary accounts of his career that it might almost have been written (possibly ghostwritten) in one of the alternate universes which he so promiscuously postulated."

[22] Proceedings. "If she did say it," former Navy commander B. Greene writes in his *Eulogy for an Expedition* (U.S. Naval Academy), "it was gratuitous and unfair. All Navy personnel understood that scientific research was the expedition's *raison d'être*, that they were there purely in a support capacity. For their part, all civilians were supposed to understand that we were there to make their jobs easier." Reklen, in his *Rock of Eternity* (GA GL), expressed "no doubt that she was bipolar." This was unlikely, though not as unlikely as M. Raap makes out in *The Soul of the Silurian* (Darcy). "Bipolar people are generally diagnosed when they are still fairly young, and this was a woman in her late forties. Even if she had, somehow, not been previously diagnosed, she could not possibly have got past screening. You don't just show up at the jump station and say, 'Hello there, I'm a scientist, please send me to the Silurian Period.'" That she could not "possibly" have got past screening is arguable, given certain other individuals who did get past it. Raap suggests that she suffered an episode of something like stress-induced psychosis after she passed through the anomaly and joined the expedition.

[23] "I was naturally alarmed by the sudden and unexpected arrival of sailors equipped with everything they needed, scrubbers, solvents, and orders, to wreck my project." Proceedings.

[24] S. Kate Maven, *The Community of the Rock: My Silurian Sojourn* (Carlo).

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popular audience whose attention was not altogether biddable.[25] Now she goes on at length:

> "I'm doing what sociologists do anywhere there is human society, people living together in groups. The grist for my particular mill is here, *now*, where we have a relative handful of people isolated from the rest of their species — isolated by four hundred million years, according to one theory, isolated in a whole other universe, according to another...."

When the petty officer shrugs this off (as well he might) and demands to know why his superior officer did not know the site was under her protection, she informs him, "I try to keep a low profile here," explaining,

> "...Back home, I can do oral-history interviews of former expedition members by the dozen and in broad daylight, but here I'm trying to minimize my presence because I don't want to make people self-conscious about what they write on the rock. I come here during the heat of the day or a little after sunrise or a little before sundown, take rubbings, photographs, do a complete three-sixty whenever it seems warranted, then clear out."[26]

Whatever really passed between protagonist and antagonist (her memoir leaves no room for doubt as to who is who), the petty officer reported the incident to his superiors. A routine name check next failed to find Dr. Maven, which meant that her credentials could not be examined[27]. There was, of course, no question of her being in Paleozoic time under false pretenses. A jump-station technician volunteered the information that she had come through unaccompanied and carrying only

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[25] Maven's *Community*, as Reklen notes in his vindictive *Rock of Eternity*, is an "aggressively self-dramatizing" work, though he lets his hatred of its author blind him to the fact that it is by no means the worst of its kind. That dubious distinction surely belongs to K. Barnet's *Silurian Tales* (Putnam Holt Rinehart Winston Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich or Their Heirs and Assigns), which concentrates (or tries to, through a fog of alcoholic self-pity) on sexual escapades and drinking bouts. His decline even from this abysmal level can be traced through the sequels he produced, *Devonian Dreams*, *Carboniferous Capers*, and *Jurassic Trailer Park Sluts* (also from Putnam et al).

[26] In a letter found among the Reklen papers and dated years after former Petty Officer Eustt's retirement from the Navy, he insists that "all the bitch said to me was 'Shove off, sailor!'"

[27] It had not yet been realized that, despite usual safeguards, the humid, septic Paleozoic environment was inimical to JGoldman10™. ("JG10 had the attention span of a mayfly and the shelf life of a banana." Poz.)

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a backpack. She had signed the register for use of the camp's communal facilities, but so little had been seen of her since then that no one could quite recall her or had a clear notion of what she might by doing in their midst. By the time her personal data were recovered, she and Reklen, the civilian liaison, had already fought the first skirmish in what was to unfold as a lifelong exchange of libel and slander, culminating in a lawsuit and a suicide. It began when he ("peremptorily"[28]) summoned her to account for herself, and received the reply that she was busy and he should go fuck himself. This, probably as much and possibly more than anything else, precipitated the formal inquiry to which in later years she referred as both a court-martial and a provost court. The terms are neither quite interchangeable in military usage nor applicable to

> what was really a most informal sort of formal inquiry — stressing "formal" as the operative word, as in "strictly for form's sake." A half-dozen of us, evenly divided between Navy and civilians, sat in a sweltering Quonset hut and asked her and the p.o. a few questions. I had no beef with her, *unlike one of the civilians who instigated the whole thing*" [emphasis added].[29]

In the extant record, on being asked how long she thought the alleged vandalism had been going on, she answers, "Almost from the first!" and names several well-known scientists, previously in Paleozoic time, whose initials she claims to have found carved or written on the rock. "Most of the inscriptions are anonymous or at least pseudonymous — signed things like 'Old Dude' and 'Spangles' and so forth. Beyond doubt Navy personnel have contributed their share, just more discreetly than the civilians." This elicits expressions of doubt and denial from the Navy officers, though apparently not from the petty officer or other ratings who are or may be present (the record is unclear), and a stern reminder from the civilian liaison that, "As visitors to this pristine primeval world, we should not go around defiling it, trashing it, or marking it up."

"The absence of trash," she replies, "and the presence of art tell me that people respect the place very much."[30]

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[28] Maven.

[29] Greene. Undoubtedly he refers to Reklen.

[30] "She was as cool as Joan of Arc answering her inquisitors at Rouen." *Ibid.* In Proceedings, Reklen opines that she has "transposed the words *art* and *trash*."

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This prompts a rejoinder from the civilian liaison, that "to dignify graffiti by subjecting it to allegedly scientific scrutiny misrepresents scribblings and doodlings whose predominant characteristics are inanity, irreverence, and obscenity. Have human beings really come all this way, across hundreds of millions of years, just to snigger over smut?"[31]

A gap in the record occurs at this juncture. When the record resumes, visual exhibits have been brought forward, consisting of photographs of the limestone slab, taken from all sides at regular intervals. Careful examination of sequences of images reveals not only material of a pornographic or otherwise questionable nature, but also that all such graphic depictions of coitus and drawings of human genitalia, whether crudely or expertly executed, are soon effaced or, more frequently, revised into fabulous Paleozoic fauna or flora, e.g., "Trilobite me" and "Cocksonia." Scatological references and the like tend ("puckishly"[32]) to mutate into faux taxonomical terms. Even the English language's most familiar expression of insolent ill regard proves vulnerable to this sort of revision. The latter of a particular pair of "before and after" images reveals a cartoon of a beStetsoned gun-toting sea scorpion appended to an inscription amended to read "Fuckeurypterid andthehorseurydon"; another inscription has attracted the rejoinder, "You idiot, it's F-U-C-U-S," which segues directly into a brief technical description of an actual seaweed genus of that name.

The Navy commander then asks, "Does it not seem from this that even some of the graffitists are offended by pornographic material? That someone has appointed themselves *[sic]* censor?" and receives the answer, "Emendation isn't restricted to the pornography. Anything you inscribe on the rock is fair game for the next person who comes along." She declares in conclusion that "the human need for self-expression is part of our baggage wherever we go — in this case, *when*ever — and it always finds an outlet. *Voilà.* The rock, the outlet." The Navy commander, by now patently weary of the whole matter, says, "So be it," and summarily adjourns the proceedings over the civilian liaison's protests.[33]

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[31] Proceedings.
[32] Maven, *Community*.
[33] Proceedings.

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In Maven's memoir, her succinct summation swells into a full-blown lecture:

> "...The rock is vital — indispensable — to the expedition's collective mental health in another way, too. It's a safety valve. It's not merely the major means, it's virtually the *only* means of genuine communication in your small, isolated, diverse, and segregated community.[34] When not actually required to interact — as now, for example — civilians and military personnel pretty much keep to themselves. When they do interact, they frequently confound one another. As now. Moreover, civilians and Navy personnel not only keep to themselves but to their hierarchical subgroups as well. These are defined by specialization or rank. Officers do not fraternize with ratings, of course. But, if they can help it, neither do field geologists and so-called black-box geologists fraternize. The astronomers and physicists look down — there is no other term to describe their attitude — look down on the geologists, who for their part emphatically do not look up to the astronomers and physicists. And everyone asks, as snidely as possible, what the hell a sociologist is doing here."[35]

This final sentence was excised prior to the memoir's publication and appears only in the posthumously discovered version. But at last we seem to have arrived at the crux of the matter! Anger and paranoia roil just beneath the surface of the published version; they break through repeatedly in the original:

> The prospect of going in alone didn't daunt me. I liked working alone; the only times I ever engaged graduate students or other assistants was when there was a lot of pure donkey-work to be done.[36] I would have the use of communal facilities. I knew I would do excellent and valuable work if I could just scrape together the price of a damn time-machine ticket! In writing this memoir, I find I still

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[36] "The reason she worked alone was because nobody could stand to work with her. She had no friends in her department and an unsavory reputation in her field." Reklen, *Rock of Eternity*.
[34] Note the use of the adjective "your," rather than "our." Maven pointedly ignores the existence of the official expedition newsource, inevitably christened *The Paleozoic Times*.
[35] Maven, *A Time Traveler's Tale of a Tempestuous, Truncated Trip* {"T^6," original, unpublished version of *The Community of the Rock*}, item # SRCA1941 in DCMB collection.

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am not quite capable of relating, in anything like an even-tempered (let alone even-handed) fashion, what I put up with, what I went through, to gain access to that strange other world. My grant requests elicited actual guffaws in certain quarters: "Sociology in the Silurian, bwah-hah!" "The Silurian Period is no place for the soft sciences, hee-yuk!" All these years later, those jackass brays of hilarity echo in my head.[37]

Her memoir's coda is laced with bitterness but concludes on what must be described as a strangely subdued note:

The inquiry wrecked my project as completely as though I had just let the swabbies at the rock in the first place. I'd come to record and study and analyze, as unobtrusively as possible, remaining aloof from the mystagogic community of the rock while also respecting its unwritten, unspoken, yet unmistakable rules. How these had been formulated and disseminated, I could have discovered only by breaking the one against spying. I had to accept that the protocols existed. You did not litter the space enclosing the rock with empty beer cans, broken glass, cigarette butts, and used condoms. You could disagree and even revise or erase someone else's work, but you could not violate anyone's anonymity or cause it to be violated; you couldn't spy on people.

And it all went right down the toilet the instant the rock became a tourist attraction and I became a celebrity. After that, I couldn't go into the labyrinth and come out again without tripping over half a dozen idiots who wanted to gab and gawk and have their pictures taken at the rock. Within the week, I packed up and shipped out, leaving work undone, puzzles unsolved, mysteries unfathomed, secrets unlearned. I also left my own inscription on the rock.

... I am in no way ashamed of what I did manage to accomplish, which was the best work I could do under the circumstances; I only wish I had been permitted to carry through to the end. I told myself that when I got home, perhaps I would look around for another isolated — but less isolated — social group, perhaps at a research station in Antarctica, perhaps on a mission to Mars.[38]

[37] Maven, *T*[6].
[38] *Ibid.*

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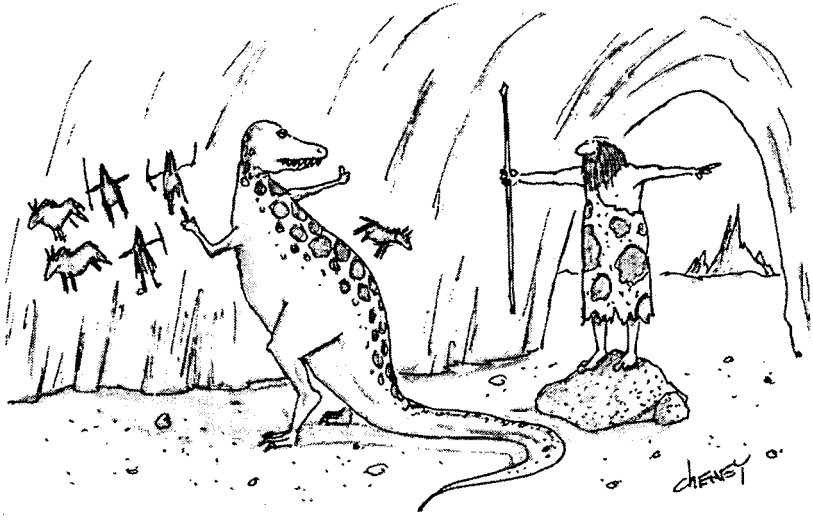
She does not reveal what she inscribed, or even how she inscribed it, and it probably did not survive long, given the plastic nature of graffiti. This leaves the door opened wide for speculation. Her avowed enemy wastes few words: "Knowing her, it was probably 'Up yours!'"[39] One author[40] suggests, solely on the strength of its being written in pencil on the last page of her field notebook, a quotation from a work of fiction entitled "Lik," by Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977): "Loneliness as a situation can be corrected, but as a state of mind it is an incurable illness." A more recent biography[41] makes a somewhat stronger case for an inscription visible in what seems to be her final image of the rock, a line which occurs again in *Community of the Rock*: "Sometimes what people don't say tells us more than what they do say." But as with so much else, we probably will never know.

[39] Reklen.
[40] Colt, *PaleozoInk*.
[41] Raap.



THE TRUE ORIGIN OF CAVE PAINTINGS.

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Our last story took us back into prehistory, and now we proceed to the end of the world. Perhaps it's not so far away....

Our guide on this trip to the end, Dale Bailey, recently published his second novel, House of Bones. *Last year his first story collection was also published, and he reports that* Sleeping Policemen, *a crime novel written in collaboration with Jack Slay, Jr., is due out in 2006...assuming the world doesn't end by then.*

The End of the World as We Know It

By Dale Bailey

BETWEEN 1347 AND 1450 A.D., bubonic plague overran Europe, killing some 75 million people. The plague, dubbed the Black Death because of the black pustules that erupted on the skin of the afflicted, was caused by a bacterium now known as *Yersinia pestis*. The Europeans of the day, lacking access to microscopes or knowledge of disease vectors, attributed their misfortune to an angry God. Flagellants roamed the land, hoping to appease His wrath. "They died by the hundreds, both day and night," Agnolo di Tura tells us. "I buried my five children with my own hands...so many died that all believed it was the end of the world."

Today, the population of Europe is about 729 million.

Evenings, Wyndham likes to sit on the porch, drinking. He likes gin, but he'll drink anything. He's not particular. Lately, he's been watching it get dark — really *watching* it, I mean, not just sitting there — and so far he's concluded that the cliché is wrong. Night doesn't fall. It's more complex than that.

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Not that he's entirely confident in the accuracy of his observations.

It's high summer just now, and Wyndham often begins drinking at two or three, so by the time the Sun sets, around nine, he's usually pretty drunk. Still, it seems to him that, if anything, night *rises*, gathering first in inky pools under the trees, as if it has leached up from underground reservoirs, and then spreading, out toward the borders of the yard and up toward the yet-lighted sky. It's only toward the end that anything falls — the blackness of deep space, he supposes, unscrolling from high above the Earth. The two planes of darkness meet somewhere in the middle, and that's night for you.

That's his current theory, anyway.

It isn't his porch, incidentally, but then it isn't his gin either — except in the sense that, in so far as Wyndham can tell anyway, *everything* now belongs to him.

End-of-the-world stories usually come in one of two varieties.

In the first, the world ends with a natural disaster, either unprecedented or on an unprecedented scale. Floods lead all other contenders — God himself, we're told, is fond of that one — though plagues have their advocates. A renewed ice age is also popular. Ditto drought.

In the second variety, irresponsible human beings bring it on themselves. Mad scientists and corrupt bureaucrats, usually. An exchange of ICBMs is the typical route, although the scenario has dated in the present geo-political environment.

Feel free to mix and match:

Genetically engineered flu virus, anyone? Melting polar ice caps?

On the day the world ended, Wyndham didn't even realize it *was* the end of the world — not right away, anyway. For him, at that point in his life, pretty much *every* day seemed like the end of the world. This was not a consequence of a chemical imbalance, either. It was a consequence of working for UPS, where, on the day the world ended, Wyndham had been employed for sixteen years, first as a loader, then in sorting, and finally in the coveted position of driver, the brown uniform and everything. By this time the company had gone public and he also owned some shares. The money was good — very good, in fact. Not only that, he liked his job.

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Still, the beginning of every goddamn day started off feeling like a cataclysm. *You* try getting up at 4:00 A.M. every morning and see how you feel.

This was his routine:

At 4:00 A.M., the alarm went off — an old-fashioned alarm, he wound it up every night. (He couldn't tolerate the radio before he drank his coffee.) He always turned it off right away, not wanting to wake his wife. He showered in the spare bathroom (again, not wanting to wake his wife; her name was Ann), poured coffee into his thermos, and ate something he probably shouldn't — a bagel, a Pop Tart — while he stood over the sink. By then, it would be 4:20, 4:25 if he was running late.

Then he would do something paradoxical: He would go back to his bedroom and wake up the wife he'd spent the last twenty minutes trying not to disturb.

"Have a good day," Wyndham always said.

His wife always did the same thing, too. She would screw her face into her pillow and smile. "Ummm," she would say, and it was usually such a cozy, loving, early-morning cuddling kind of "ummm" that it almost made getting up at four in the goddamn morning worth it.

Wyndham heard about the World Trade Center — *not* the end of the world, though to Wyndham it sure as hell felt that way — from one of his customers.

The customer — her name was Monica — was one of Wyndham's regulars: a Home Shopping Network fiend, this woman. She was big, too. The kind of woman of whom people say "She has a nice personality" or "She has such a pretty face." She did have a nice personality, too — at least Wyndham thought she did. So he was concerned when she opened the door in tears.

"What's wrong?" he said.

Monica shook her head, at a loss for words. She waved him inside. Wyndham, in violation of about fifty UPS regulations, stepped in after her. The house smelled of sausage and floral air freshener. There was Home Shopping Network shit everywhere. I mean, *everywhere*.

Wyndham hardly noticed.

His gaze was fixed on the television. It was showing an airliner flying

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into the World Trade Center. He stood there and watched it from three or four different angles before he noticed the Home Shopping Network logo in the lower right-hand corner of the screen.

That was when he concluded that it must be the end of the world. He couldn't imagine the Home Shopping Network preempting regularly scheduled programming for anything less.

The Muslim extremists who flew airplanes into the World Trade Center, into the Pentagon, and into the unyielding earth of an otherwise unremarkable field in Pennsylvania, were secure, we are told, in the knowledge of their imminent translation into paradise.

There were nineteen of them.

Every one of them had a name.

WYNDHAM'S WIFE was something of a reader. She liked to read in bed. Before she went to sleep she always marked her spot using a bookmark Wyndham had given her for her birthday one year: It was a cardboard bookmark with a yarn ribbon at the top, and a picture of a rainbow arching high over white-capped mountains. *Smile*, the bookmark said. *God loves you.*

Wyndham wasn't much of a reader, but if he'd picked up his wife's book the day the world ended he would have found the first few pages interesting. In the opening chapter, God raptures all true Christians to Heaven. This includes true Christians who are driving cars and trains and airplanes, resulting in uncounted lost lives as well as significant damages to personal property. If Wyndham *had* read the book, he'd have thought of a bumper sticker he sometimes saw from high in his UPS truck. *Warning*, the bumper sticker read, *In case of Rapture, this car will be unmanned.* Whenever he saw that bumper sticker, Wyndham imagined cars crashing, planes falling from the sky, patients abandoned on the operating table — pretty much the scenario of his wife's book, in fact.

Wyndham went to church every Sunday, but he couldn't help wondering what would happen to the untold millions of people who *weren't* true Christians — whether by choice or by the geographical fluke of having been born in some place like Indonesia. What if they were crossing

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the street in front of one of those cars, he wondered, or watering lawns those planes would soon plow into?

But I was saying:

On the day the world ended Wyndham didn't understand right away what had happened. His alarm clock went off the way it always did and he went through his normal routine. Shower in the spare bath, coffee in the thermos, breakfast over the sink (a chocolate donut, this time, and gone a little stale). Then he went back to the bedroom to say good-bye to his wife.

"Have a good day," he said, as he always said, and, leaning over, he shook her a little: not enough to really wake her, just enough to get her stirring. In sixteen years of performing this ritual, minus federal holidays and two weeks of paid vacation in the summer, Wyndham had pretty much mastered it. He could cause her to stir without quite waking her up just about every time.

So to say he was surprised when his wife didn't screw her face into her pillow and smile is something of an understatement. He was shocked, actually. And there was an additional consideration: She hadn't said, "Ummm," either. Not the usual luxurious, warm-morning-bed kind of "ummm," and not the infrequent but still familiar stuffy, I-have-a-cold-and-my-head-aches kind of "ummm," either.

No "ummm" at all.

The air-conditioning cycled off. For the first time Wyndham noticed a strange smell — a faint, organic funk, like spoiled milk, or unwashed feet.

Standing there in the dark, Wyndham began to have a very bad feeling. It was a different kind of bad feeling than the one he'd had in Monica's living room watching airliners plunge again and again into the World Trade Center. That had been a powerful but largely impersonal bad feeling — I say "largely impersonal" because Wyndham had a third cousin who worked at Cantor Fitzgerald. (The cousin's name was Chris; Wyndham had to look it up in his address book every year when he sent out cards celebrating the birth of his personal savior.) The bad feeling he began to have when his wife failed to say "ummm," on the other hand, was powerful and *personal*.

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Concerned, Wyndham reached down and touched his wife's face. It was like touching a woman made of wax, lifeless and cool, and it was at that moment — that moment precisely — that Wyndham realized the world had come to an end.

Everything after that was just details.

Beyond the mad scientists and corrupt bureaucrats, characters in end-of-the-world stories typically come in one of three varieties.

The first is the rugged individualist. You know the type: self-reliant, iconoclastic loners who know how to use firearms and deliver babies. By story's end, they're well on their way to Reestablishing Western Civilization — though they're usually smart enough not to return to the Bad Old Ways.

The second variety is the post-apocalyptic bandit. These characters often come in gangs, and they face off against the rugged survivor types. If you happen to prefer cinematic incarnations of the end-of-the-world tale, you can usually recognize them by their penchant for bondage gear, punked-out haircuts, and customized vehicles. Unlike the rugged survivors, the post-apocalyptic bandits embrace the Bad Old Ways — though they're not displeased by the expanded opportunities to rape and pillage.

The third type of character — also pretty common, though a good deal less so than the other two — is the world-weary sophisticate. Like Wyndham, such characters drink too much; unlike Wyndham, they suffer badly from *ennui*. Wyndham suffers too, of course, but whatever he suffers from, you can bet it's not *ennui*.

We were discussing details, though:

Wyndham did the things people do when they discover a loved one dead. He picked up the phone and dialed 9-1-1. There seemed to be something wrong with the line, however; no one picked up on the other end. Wyndham took a deep breath, went into the kitchen, and tried the extension. Once again he had no success.

The reason, of course, was that, this being the end of the world, all the people who were supposed to answer the phones were dead. Imagine them being swept away by a tidal wave if that helps — which is exactly what happened to more than three thousand people during a storm in Pakistan

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in 1960. (Not that this is *literally* what happened to the operators who would have taken Wyndham's 9-1-1 call, you understand; but more about what *really* happened to them later — the important thing is that one moment they had been alive; the next they were dead. Like Wyndham's wife.)

Wyndham gave up on the phone.

He went back into the bedroom. He performed a fumbling version of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on his wife for fifteen minutes or so, and then he gave that up, too. He walked into his daughter's bedroom (she was twelve and her name was Ellen). He found her lying on her back, her mouth slightly agape. He reached down to shake her — he was going to tell her that something terrible had happened; that her mother had died — but he found that something terrible had happened to her as well. The same terrible thing, in fact.

Wyndham panicked.

He raced outside, where the first hint of red had begun to bleed up over the horizon. His neighbor's automatic irrigation system was on, the heads whickering in the silence, and as he sprinted across the lawn, Wyndham felt the spray, like a cool hand against his face. Then, chilled, he was standing on his neighbor's stoop. Hammering the door with both fists. Screaming.

After a time — he didn't know how long — a dreadful calm settled over him. There was no sound but the sound of the sprinklers, throwing glittering arcs of spray into the halo of the street light on the corner.

He had a vision, then. It was as close as he had ever come to a moment of genuine prescience. In the vision, he saw the suburban houses stretching away in silence before him. He saw the silent bedrooms. In them, curled beneath the sheets, he saw a legion of sleepers, also silent, who would never again wake up.

Wyndham swallowed.

Then he did something he could not have imagined doing even twenty minutes ago. He bent over, fished the key from its hiding place between the bricks, and let himself inside his neighbor's house.

The neighbor's cat slipped past him, mewing querulously. Wyndham had already reached down to retrieve it when he noticed the smell — that unpleasant, faintly organic funk. Not spoiled milk, either. And not feet. Something worse: soiled diapers, or a clogged toilet.

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Wyndham straightened, the cat forgotten.

"Herm?" he called. "Robin?"

No answer.

Inside, Wyndham picked up the phone, and dialed 9-1-1. He listened to it ring for a long time; then, without bothering to turn it off, Wyndham dropped the phone to the floor. He made his way through the silent house, snapping on lights. At the door to the master bedroom, he hesitated. The odor — it was unmistakable now, a mingled stench of urine and feces, of all the body's muscles relaxing at once — was stronger here. When he spoke again, whispering really —

"Herm? Robin?"

— he no longer expected an answer.

Wyndham turned on the light. Robin and Herm were shapes in the bed, unmoving. Stepping closer, Wyndham stared down at them. A fleeting series of images cascaded through his mind, images of Herm and Robin working the grill at the neighborhood block party or puttering in their vegetable garden. They'd had a knack for tomatoes, Robin and Herm. Wyndham's wife had always loved their tomatoes.

Something caught in Wyndham's throat.

He went away for a while then.

The world just grayed out on him.

When he came back, Wyndham found himself in the living room, standing in front of Robin and Herm's television. He turned it on and cycled through the channels, but there was nothing on. Literally nothing. Snow, that's all. Seventy-five channels of snow. The end of the world had always been televised in Wyndham's experience. The fact that it wasn't being televised now suggested that it really *was* the end of the world.

This is not to suggest that television validates human experience — of the end of the world or indeed of anything else, for that matter.

You could ask the people of Pompeii, if most of them hadn't died in a volcano eruption in 79 A.D., nearly two millennia before television. When Vesuvius erupted, sending lava thundering down the mountainside at four miles a minute, some sixteen thousand people perished. By some freakish geological quirk, some of them — their shells, anyway — were

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preserved, frozen inside casts of volcanic ash. Their arms are outstretched in pleas for mercy, their faces frozen in horror.

For a fee, you can visit them today.

Here's one of my favorite end-of-the-world scenarios by the way: Carnivorous plants.

Wyndham got in his car and went looking for assistance — a functioning telephone or television, a helpful passer-by. He found instead more non-functioning telephones and televisions. And, of course, more non-functioning people: lots of those, though he had to look harder for them than you might have expected. They weren't scattered in the streets, or dead at the wheels of their cars in a massive traffic jam — though Wyndham supposed that might have been the case somewhere in Europe, where the catastrophe — whatever it was — had fallen square in the middle of the morning rush.

Here, however, it seemed to have caught most folks at home in bed; as a result, the roads were more than usually passable.

At a loss — numb, really — Wyndham drove to work. He might have been in shock by then. He'd gotten accustomed to the smell, anyway, and the corpses of the night shift — men and women he'd known for sixteen years, in some cases — didn't shake him as much. What *did* shake him was the sight of all the packages in the sorting area: He was struck suddenly by the fact that none of them would ever be delivered. So Wyndham loaded his truck and went out on his route. He wasn't sure why he did it — maybe because he'd rented a movie once in which a post-apocalyptic drifter scavenges a U.S. Postal uniform and manages to Reestablish Western Civilization (but not the Bad Old Ways) by assuming the postman's appointed rounds. The futility of Wyndham's own efforts quickly became evident, however.

He gave it up when he found that even Monica — or, as he more often thought of her, the Home Shopping Network Lady — was no longer in the business of receiving packages. Wyndham found her face down on the kitchen floor, clutching a shattered coffee mug in one hand. In death she had neither a pretty face nor a nice personality. She did have that same ripe unpleasant odor, however. In spite of it, Wyndham stood looking down at her for the longest time. He couldn't seem to look away.

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When he finally *did* look away, Wyndham went back to the living room where he had once watched nearly three thousand people die, and opened her package himself. When it came to UPS rules, the Home Shopping Network Lady's living room was turning out to be something of a post-apocalyptic zone in its own right.

Wyndham tore the mailing tape off and dropped it on the floor. He opened the box. Inside, wrapped safely in three layers of bubble wrap, he found a porcelain statue of Elvis Presley.

Elvis Presley, the King of Rock 'n' Roll, died August 16, 1977, while sitting on the toilet. An autopsy revealed that he had ingested an impressive cocktail of prescription drugs — including codeine, ethinimate, methaqualone, and various barbiturates. Doctors also found trace elements of Valium, Demerol, and other pharmaceuticals in his veins.

For a time, Wyndham comforted himself with the illusion that the end of the world had been a local phenomenon. He sat in his truck outside the Home Shopping Network Lady's house and awaited rescue — the sound of sirens or approaching choppers, whatever. He fell asleep cradling the porcelain statue of Elvis. He woke up at dawn, stiff from sleeping in the truck, to find a stray dog nosing around outside.

Clearly rescue would not be forthcoming.

Wyndham chased off the dog and placed Elvis gently on the sidewalk. Then he drove off, heading out of the city. Periodically, he stopped, each time confirming what he had already known the minute he touched his dead wife's face: The end of the world was upon him. He found nothing but non-functioning telephones, non-functioning televisions, and non-functioning people. Along the way he listened to a lot of non-functioning radio stations.

You, like Wyndham, may be curious about the catastrophe that has befallen everyone in the world around him. You may even be wondering why Wyndham has survived.

End-of-the-world tales typically make a big deal about such things, but Wyndham's curiosity will never be satisfied. Unfortunately, neither will yours.

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Shit happens.

It's the end of the world after all.

THE DINOSAURS never discovered what caused *their* extinction, either.

At this writing, however, most scientists agree that the dinosaurs met their fate when an asteroid nine miles wide plowed into the Earth just south of the Yucatan Peninsula, triggering gigantic tsunamis, hurricane-force winds, worldwide forest fires, and a flurry of volcanic activity. The crater is still there — it's 120 miles wide and more than a mile deep — but the dinosaurs, along with seventy-five percent of the other species then alive, are gone. Many of them died in the impact, vaporized in an explosion equivalent to thousands of megatons. Those that survived the initial cataclysm would have perished soon after as acid rain poisoned the world's water, and dust obscured the Sun, plunging the planet into a years-long winter.

For what it's worth, this impact was merely the most dramatic in a long series of mass extinctions; they occur in the fossil record at roughly thirty million-year intervals. Some scientists have linked these intervals to the solar system's periodic journey through the galactic plane, which dislodges millions of comets from the Oort cloud beyond Pluto, raining them down on Earth. This theory, still contested, is called the Shiva Hypothesis in honor of the Hindu god of destruction.

The inhabitants of Lisbon would have appreciated the allusion on November 1, 1755, when the city was struck by an earthquake measuring 8.5 on the Richter Scale. The tremor leveled more than twelve thousand homes and ignited a fire that burned for six days.

More than sixty thousand people perished.

This event inspired Voltaire to write *Candide*, in which Dr. Pangloss advises us that this is the best of all possible worlds.

Wyndham could have filled the gas tank in his truck. There were gas stations at just about every exit along the highway, and *they* seemed to be functioning well enough. He didn't bother, though.

When the truck ran out of gas, he just pulled to the side of the road,

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hopped down, and struck off across the fields. When it started getting dark — this was before he had launched himself on the study of just how it is night falls — he took shelter in the nearest house.

It was a nice place, a two-story brick set well back from the country road he was by then walking on. It had some big trees in the front yard. In the back, a shaded lawn sloped down to the kind of woods you see in movies, but not often in real life: enormous, old trees with generous, leaf-carpeted avenues. It was the kind of place his wife would have loved, and he regretted having to break a window to get inside. But there it was: It was the end of the world and he had to have a place to sleep. What else could he do?

Wyndham hadn't planned to stay there, but when he woke up the next morning he couldn't think of anywhere to go. He found two non-functional old people in one upstairs bedroom and he tried to do for them what he had not been able to do for his wife and daughter: Using a spade from the garage, he started digging a grave in the front yard. After an hour or so, his hands began to blister and crack. His muscles — soft from sitting behind the wheel of a UPS truck for all those years — rebelled.

He rested for a while, and then he loaded the old people into the car he found parked in the garage — a slate-blue Volvo station wagon with 37,312 miles on the odometer. He drove them a mile or two down the road, pulled over, and laid them out, side by side, in a grove of beech trees. He tried to say some words over them before he left — his wife would have wanted him to — but he couldn't think of anything appropriate so he finally gave it up and went back to the house.

It wouldn't have made much difference: Though Wyndham didn't know it, the old people were lapsed Jews. According to the faith Wyndham shared with his wife, they were doomed to burn in hell for all eternity anyway. Both of them were first-generation immigrants; most of their families had already been burned up in ovens at Dachau and Buchenwald.

Burning wouldn't have been anything new for them.

Speaking of fires, the Triangle Shirt Waist Factory in New York City burned on March 25, 1911. One hundred and forty-six people died. Many

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of them might have survived, but the factory's owners had locked the exits to prevent theft.

Rome burned, too. It is said that Nero fiddled.

Back at the house, Wyndham washed up and made himself a drink from the liquor cabinet he found in the kitchen. He'd never been much of a drinker before the world ended, but he didn't see any reason not to give it a try now. His experiment proved such a success that he began sitting out on the porch nights, drinking gin and watching the sky. One night he thought he saw a plane, lights blinking as it arced high overhead. Later, sober, he concluded that it must have been a satellite, still whipping around the planet, beaming down telemetry to empty listening stations and abandoned command posts.

A day or two later the power went out. And a few days after that, Wyndham ran out of liquor. Using the Volvo, he set off in search of a town. Characters in end-of-the-world stories commonly drive vehicles of two types: The jaded sophisticates tend to drive souped-up sports cars, often racing them along the Australian coastline because what else do they have to live for; everyone else drives rugged SUVs. Since the 1991 Persian Gulf War — in which some twenty-three thousand people died, most of them Iraqi conscripts killed by American smart bombs — military-style Humvees have been especially coveted. Wyndham, however, found the Volvo entirely adequate to his needs.

No one shot at him.

He was not assaulted by a roving pack of feral dogs.

He found a town after only fifteen minutes on the road. He didn't see any evidence of looting. Everybody was too dead to loot; that's the way it is at the end of the world.

On the way, Wyndham passed a sporting goods store where he did not stop to stock up on weapons or survival equipment. He passed numerous abandoned vehicles, but he did not stop to siphon off some gas. He *did* stop at the liquor store, where he smashed a window with a rock and helped himself to several cases of gin, whiskey, and vodka. He also stopped at the grocery store, where he found the reeking bodies of the night crew sprawled out beside carts of supplies that would never make it onto the shelves. Holding a handkerchief over his nose, Wyndham loaded up on

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tonic water and a variety of other mixers. He also got some canned goods, though he didn't feel any imperative to stock up beyond his immediate needs. He ignored the bottled water.

In the book section, he *did* pick up a bartender's guide.

Some end-of-the-world stories present us with two post-apocalypse survivors, one male and one female. These two survivors take it upon themselves to Repopulate the Earth, part of their larger effort to Reestablish Western Civilization without the Bad Old Ways. Their names are always artfully withheld until the end of the story, at which point they are invariably revealed to be Adam and Eve.

The truth is, almost all end-of-the-world stories are at some level Adam-and-Eve stories. That may be why they enjoy such popularity. In the interests of total disclosure, I will admit that in fallow periods of my own sexual life — and, alas, these periods have been more frequent than I'd care to admit — I've often found Adam-and-Eve post-holocaust fantasies strangely comforting. Being the only man alive significantly reduces the potential for rejection in my view. And it cuts performance anxiety practically to nothing.

There's a woman in this story, too.

Don't get your hopes up.

By this time, Wyndham has been living in the brick house for almost two weeks. He sleeps in the old couple's bedroom, and he sleeps pretty well, but maybe that's the gin. Some mornings he wakes up disoriented, wondering where his wife is and how he came to be in a strange place. Other mornings he wakes up feeling like he dreamed everything else and this has always been his bedroom.

One day, though, he wakes up early, to gray pre-dawn light. Someone is moving around downstairs. Wyndham's curious, but he's not afraid. He doesn't wish he'd stopped at the sporting goods store and gotten a gun. Wyndham has never shot a gun in his life. If he did shoot someone — even a post-apocalyptic punk with cannibalism on his mind — he'd probably have a breakdown.

Wyndham doesn't try to disguise his presence as he goes downstairs.

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There's a woman in the living room. She's not bad looking, this woman — blonde in a washed-out kind of way, trim, and young, twenty-five, thirty at the most. She doesn't look extremely clean, and she doesn't smell much better, but hygiene hasn't been uppermost on Wyndham's mind lately, either. Who is he to judge?

"I was looking for a place to sleep," the woman says.

"There's a spare bedroom upstairs," Wyndham tells her.

THE NEXT MORNING — it's really almost noon, but Wyndham has gotten into the habit of sleeping late — they eat breakfast together: a Pop Tart for the woman, a bowl of dry Cheerios for Wyndham.

They compare notes, but we don't need to get into that. It's the end of the world and the woman doesn't know how it happened any more than Wyndham does or you do or anybody ever does. She does most of the talking, though. Wyndham's never been much of a talker, even at the best of times.

He doesn't ask her to stay. He doesn't ask her to leave.

He doesn't ask her much of anything.

That's how it goes all day.

Sometimes the whole sex thing *causes* the end of the world.

In fact, if you'll permit me to reference Adam and Eve just one more time, sex and death have been connected to the end of the world ever since — well, the beginning of the world. Eve, despite warnings to the contrary, eats of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and realizes she's naked — that is, a sexual being. Then she introduces Adam to the idea by giving him a bite of the fruit.

God punishes Adam and Eve for their transgression by kicking them out of Paradise and introducing death into the world. And there you have it: the first apocalypse, *eros* and *thanatos* all tied up in one neat little bundle, and it's all Eve's fault.

No wonder feminists don't like that story. It's a pretty corrosive view of female sexuality when you think about it.

Coincidentally, perhaps, one of my favorite end-of-the-world stories involves some astronauts who fall into a time warp; when they get out

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they learn that all the men are dead. The women have done pretty well for themselves in the meantime. They no longer need men to reproduce and they've set up a society that seems to work okay without men — better in fact than our messy two-sex societies ever have.

But do the men stay out of it?

They do not. They're men, after all, and they're driven by their need for sexual dominance. It's genetically encoded so to speak, and it's not long before they're trying to turn this Eden into another fallen world. It's sex that does it, violent male sex — rape, actually. In other words, sex that's more about the violence than the sex.

And certainly nothing to do with love.

Which, when you think about it, is a pretty corrosive view of male sexuality.

The more things change the more they stay the same, I guess.

Wyndham, though.

Wyndham heads out on the porch around three. He's got some tonic. He's got some gin. It's what he does now. He doesn't know where the woman is, doesn't have strong feelings on the issue either way.

He's been sitting there for hours when she joins him. Wyndham doesn't know what time it is, but the air has that hazy underwater quality that comes around twilight. Darkness is starting to pool under the trees, the crickets are tuning up, and it's so peaceful that for a moment Wyndham can almost forget that it's the end of the world.

Then the screen door claps shut behind the woman. Wyndham can tell right away that she's done something to herself, though he couldn't tell you for sure what it is: that magic women do, he guesses. His wife used to do it, too. She always looked good to him, but sometimes she looked just flat-out amazing. Some powder, a little blush. Lipstick. You know.

And he appreciates the effort. He does. He's flattered even. She's an attractive woman. Intelligent, too.

The truth is, though, he's just not interested.

She sits beside him, and all the time she's talking. And though she doesn't say it in so many words, what she's talking about is Repopulating the World and Reestablishing Western Civilization. She's talking about Duty. She's talking about it because that's what you're supposed to talk

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about at times like this. But underneath that is sex. And underneath that, way down, is loneliness — and he has some sympathy for that, Wyndham does. After a while, she touches Wyndham, but he's got nothing. He might as well be dead down there.

"What's wrong with you?" she says.

Wyndham doesn't know how to answer her. He doesn't know how to tell her that the end of the world isn't about any of that stuff. The end of the world is about something else, he doesn't have a word for it.

So, anyway, Wyndham's wife.

She has another book on her nightstand, too. She doesn't read it every night, only on Sundays. But the week before the end of the world the story she was reading was the story of Job.

You know the story, right?

It goes like this: God and Satan — the Adversary, anyway; that's probably the better translation — make a wager. They want to see just how much shit God's most faithful servant will eat before he renounces his faith. The servant's name is Job. So they make the wager, and God starts feeding Job shit. Takes his riches, takes his cattle, takes his health. Deprives him of his friends. On and on. Finally — and this is the part that always got to Wyndham — God takes Job's wife and his children.

Let me clarify: In this context "takes" should be read as "kills."

You with me on this? Like Krakatoa, a volcanic island that used to exist between Java and Sumatra. On August 27, 1883, Krakatoa exploded, spewing ash fifty miles into the sky and vomiting up five cubic miles of rock. The concussion was heard three thousand miles away. It created tsunamis towering one hundred twenty feet in the air. Imagine all that water crashing down on the flimsy villages that lined the shores of Java and Sumatra.

Thirty thousand people died.

Every single one of them had a name.

Job's wife and kids. Dead. Just like thirty thousand nameless Javanese.

As for Job? He keeps shoveling down the shit. He will not renounce God. He keeps the faith. And he's rewarded: God gives him back his riches, his cattle. God restores his health, and sends him friends. God replaces his wife and kids.

Pay attention: Word choice is important in an end-of-the-world story.

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I said "replaces," not "restores."

Different wife. Different kids.

The other wife, the other kids? They stay dead, gone, non-functioning, erased forever from the Earth, just like the dinosaurs and the twelve million undesirables incinerated by the Nazis and the five hundred thousand slaughtered in Rwanda and the 1.7 million murdered in Cambodia and the sixty million immolated in the Middle Passage.

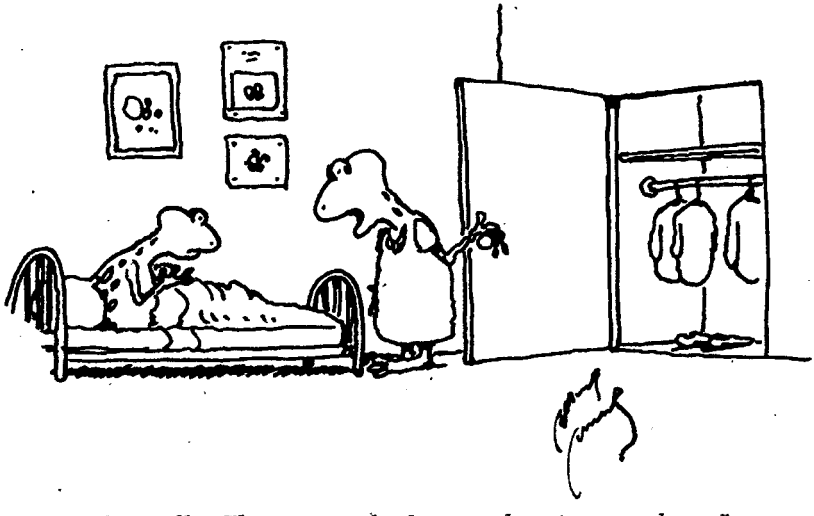
That merry prankster God.

That jokester.

That's what the end of the world is about, Wyndham wants to say. The rest is just details.

By this point the woman (You want her to have a name? She deserves one, don't you think?) has started to weep softly. Wyndham gets to his feet and goes into the dark kitchen for another glass. Then he comes back out to the porch and makes a gin and tonic. He sits beside her and presses the cool glass upon her. It's all he knows to do.

"Here," he says. "Drink this. It'll help."



"See, Billy! There isn't a biology student in your closet."

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The latest news regarding Mr. Bishop (almost all of which is available on his Website at www.michaelbishop-writer.com*) is that we can look forward to a collection of essays, reviews, memoirs and more sometime in 2005. The title of this forthcoming book is* A Reverie for Mister Ray: Reflections on Life, Death, and Speculative Fiction. *Mr. Bishop also notes that he is working on a series of short pieces set in Georgia over the last seven decades, but here he brings us a story that says we aren't in Georgia anymore. This wry piece is something of a tribute to the late George Alec Effinger, a writer who paid homage to quite a few writers in his own way (particularly under the* nom de plume *of O. Niemand).*

The Angst of God

By Michael Bishop

THE ZTUN STUNNED US. They had seen that certain arrogant superpowers and certain stateless fanatics gripped Earth in a brutal vise, and they were appalled. Outraged on our behalf, the ztun intervened. After parking their light cruiser in disguised orbit around Earth, they dropped microscopic chemical "seeds" into our atmosphere. These reacted with our terrestrial gasses, rendering any human indigene — and *only* human indigenes — comatose for twenty-four hours or an entire year, depending on the innate bellicosity of the person incapacitated. You could say that the ztun *gassed* us, but actually they reconfigured the makeup of our air. The ztun stunned us, for our own good.

The ztun do not discriminate among "civilized" worlds in exercising either their judgment or their powers. They reconnoiter the dense core and the diffuse spiral arms of our galaxy making their lists and checking them twice. They determine which sentient species are naughty and which nice and chemically correct every instance of the former. The magic grains by which the ztun reconfigure a planetary atmosphere

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stymie the worst bullies for a full local year, but let the lowly and the peaceful resume their lives after only a single day of oblivion. By the time the ztun stunned us human beings, they had already "gassed" a dozen intelligent species in our galactic vicinity. Then they abducted all the most warlike leaders, to psychoanalyze in the long transit to their home world.

As an analogy, let me cite the gassing of the Moscow Opera House, decades ago, when Islamic separatists seized that building and held its occupants hostage. The black-clad rebels threatened to blow everyone up if the Russian leader refused to stop the war in Chechnya and to grant it independence. Wisely or foolishly, the Russian authorities used a secret gas to knock out everyone in the Opera House, terrorists and hostages alike. Unfortunately, so crudely did this gas work that, although it ended the siege, it also killed many of those gassed, including 120 hostages.

The ztun, however, are better chemists, physicists, astronomers, engineers, and general technophiles than those bumbling Russians. Indeed, they excel at such tasks, lacking peers in the known universe. And so, when altering the atmospheres of worlds with morally pesky and/or deficient intelligent species, they rarely take a life. Those autochthons that accidentally die, the ztun regard as martyrs to their ethical cleansing of yet another reprehensible species.

"We've done you a favor," the ztun argued. "Uprooted your vilest weeds and taken them home to repot as hollyhocks."

"*Roses*," I said to my shipboard counselor. "The hollyhock's a gaudy plant with no poetic resonances."

"We *know* hollyhocks," Counselor Ztang said. "And, believe me, we find them lovelier than your run-of-the-trellis Bobby Burns roses."

I belonged to a small caste of bellicose entities whom the ztun had chosen to take home to their small planet orbiting the star Spica (274 light years from Earth). The inside of their light cruiser — what I'd seen of it — resembled a cross between a brand-new sewer system (lots of tubular passages, metal ladders, and oddly placed manhole covers) and a high-tech playground (redwood monkey bars, cedar-sided slides and swings, and crumbly peat-moss-carpeted floors). The decor stemmed in part from the fact that the ztun are lanky humanoid legumes with lianas for limbs and

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yellowish pods for bellies, butts, and heads. However, I spent most of my time in a metabolic-suspension berth — the ztun call them beds, of course — to avoid the effects of aging, which the ztun escaped by sprouting new appendages every few days.

Every other alien captive *also* went into a suspension berth. At length, I met five others. Counselor Ztang brought us together now and again for — well, *group-therapy sessions*. Previously, you see, I had served the Half Vast Rocky Mountain Hegemon as commander-in-chief of its Global Interdiction & Liberation Force. So I bridled when Ztang told me to sit, to speak, or to pay more attention. Who did Ztang think he was, anyway? And why should a man of my status kowtow to a yellowbelly bean like him, even under threat of instant molecular dispersal?

Well, circumstances change minds, and rapping with my alien therapy mates gave me to understand that rank is relative, and life a fleeting dream — when it isn't an outright outré nightmare.

At my first session, Ztang introduced me to the chief decapitationist of an inner planet of 61 Cygni A (11.2 light years from Earth). We met in the main therapy cabin, where a mother-of-pearl mist imparted a gothic surreality to our talk. The air in this cabin was Omnirespirable O (the ztun designation for a universally life-supporting mix), and Ztang gave my partner and me DNA-coded translator scarabs. I put mine in my ear, but the reptilian Cygnusian stuck his to his cobalt-blue throat. The lizard called himself a "toidi," his name for the dominant intelligent species on his home planet, and, frankly, he stank — like a combo of sour apricots and snaky sex.

"Go ahead," Counselor Ztang urged the toidi. "Tell General Draper who you are and why you're here."

"Call me Al," the lizard said. And then he wept, exuding from his skin a ruby-red oil that lent his signature B.O. a sweet fecal undertone.

"Gaah," I said.

Our scarabs translated, rendering my "Gaah" into late-empiric English as "*Al's scent borders on the putrid.*" Al noted that he could say the same of mine, so Ztang broke out a spray bulb to neutralize the odors gagging us both.

Al admitted authorizing all the political decapitations in the predominant nation on the only life-supporting planet circling 61 Cygni A.

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He admitted having the victims' severed heads placed atop the cactus-ringed rocks marking their family burrows. Al felt no remorse for this brutality, though, which he claimed had kept his nation from plunging into cold-blooded anarchy. Ztang's mouth fringes rippled, but he said nothing.

I spoke into his silence: "Counselor, how can a species that's poisoned the air of twelve planets presume to teach *anyone* nonviolent behavior?"

My mind turned inside out. An indivisible blackness came upon me.

But my *second* official gathering included the toidi again and an energy creature from Epsilon Eridani IV (10.7 light years from Earth). This creature, with a head like an otter's, flickered unpredictably in and out of view. She answered to the name Seyj and smelled of stale Worcestershire sauce and fried plastic — until Ztang neutralized her scent with his papaya-shaped spray bulb.

Seyj and her kind lived amid a system of charged fields that the chief political entity on her planet generated and withdrew at whim, often killing fellow "caparoina" — as all intelligent Eridanians were called — hostile to its policies. The ztun believed that Seyj herself had authorized the withdrawal of fields resulting in two million caparoina deaths. Like Al; however, Seyj insisted that her actions had saved her world from both barbarism and commercial stagnation.

Ztang eyed me meaningfully. "Please, General Draper, reintroduce yourself to Al and tell both him and Seyj what most troubles you this morning."

The bean terrified me. What if my words again rendered me *non grata*? Sensing my reluctance, Ztang lifted a finger pod and swore that nothing I uttered would expel me from his good graces.

"In that case," I said, "what most frets me today is the impunity with which you judgmental ztun have butted in all over our galaxy."

Al gasped and sweated his ruby sweat. Seyj's head pulsed out of view, leaving only the gray outline of her body behind.

And, yes, an indivisible blackness seized me.

But Counselor Ztang forgave me. A week later, in a new session, I met a seven-armed, chitin-plated sentient caterpillar from the Tau Ceti system (11.9 light years from Earth). This caterpillar, Kaa Lotcharre, had invented a liquid incendiary called "spark tar," which flowed across the

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countryside igniting the enemy upon contact and reducing him to ash. Lotcharre — scientist and tar master — boasted of his expertise as a materials engineer and a genocidal assassin. Al and Seyj, brutal decapitationist and ruthless force-field manipulator, sat unmoving, visibly cowed. I laughed — derisively, I admit — and was slammed *a third time* into indivisible blackness.

Eventually, I met two more war criminals, the last in my group of six: a jellyfish with front-facing eyes, and a living slab of ochre granite that pulsed with ennui and a large inner constituency of agitated flecks of mica. The jellyfish hailed from Groombridge 34 (11.6 light years from Earth), smelled vaguely like cotton candy, and answered to a name something like Gilneta. The granite slab had originated on a planet orbiting Lacaille 9352 (11.7 light years from Earth). A hermaphrodite named Bacmudsorak, it locomoted on a rubbery foot and secreted a musky slime that it shoved backward to create a pressure gradient enabling it to move forward. Bacmudsorak kept many crystalline personalities within itself and felled its enemies by sending subliminal bolts of igneous music at them via headache-inducing radio frequencies.

I said nothing when Counselor Ztang introduced me to Gilneta, the jellyfish, and so escaped early banishment to my suspension berth. But during my next session, with Bacmudsorak on hand in the guise of a glowing, lopsided coffee table, I tapped my feet to some sort of heavy, heartfelt, subliminal music.

Al's wattles undulated, Seyj's head pulsed in and out of view, Lotcharre's seven arms writhed, and Gilneta's iridescent violet bell swayed as if combers from a fearful oceanic storm were pounding her. As for Counselor Ztang, his runners grew and shrank in beat-driven cycles, and the beans in his pods rattled like a set of traps. Bacmudsorak thrummed, and everyone jived. Don't ask me what that rock confessed to, but, unlike the rest of us, it did communicate a candid remorse.

Over our next few meetings, against my expectations, Al, Seyj, Kaa Lotcharre, Gilneta, Bacmudsorak, and I *bonded*.

Al lamented the inevitable heartbreak of cold-bloodedness in most toidi family relationships. Seyj confessed the trauma of learning that a sister caparoina had a bipolar electrical orientation, and Kaa Lotcharre

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observed that few citizens of his war-torn land could manage the complex excruciations of metamorphosis without breaking; indeed, he had spun silk about himself at least three times to *escape* adulthood rather than to *trigger* it. Gilneta opened up, lamenting the nettlesome nature of jellyfishhood, particularly one's dependence for transport on methane swells and cetacean nudges. Bacmudsorak, swearing us all to secrecy, noted that early in its igneous development, it had harbored a millennia-long case of pyroclastic envy against a pit mine of collateral laminates. Even Counselor Ztang, usually one shut-mouthed bean, let slip that a virulent fungal smut had almost derailed his aspirations to enter the ztun space force.

And I, Myron "Pit Bull" Draper?

Well, I acknowledged that I had secured my high position in the Rocky Mountain Hegemon by boinking President Bobeck's wife, Eustace, and diverting a thousand shares of my own dirty-bomb stock to the portfolio of the Secretary of War. I also admitted my teenage affair with a comely creature on an Alberta sheep ranch, tossing hand grenades at protected wolves, paying a heroin addict to put a nail bomb in the mailbox of a peacenik fag, and using tax monies to indulge my three-decade-old pink-shoe fetish. I reckon I got carried away.

My support group listened closely. Seyj fought hardest to withhold judgment, I believe, and the disappearance of her head for part of this session no doubt bespoke the intensity of her ambivalence. Ztang dehisced, scattering a rattle of seeds across the floor, but everyone else offered upbeat, if bemused, encouragement.

When next we met, Seyj declared that of all us captives in the ztun therapy cabin, only I interposed artificial accoutrements between my body and their optical equipment. In short, I wore *clothes*.

"So?" Bacmudsorak said.

My refusal to appear before them nude, Seyj noted, left me open to accusations of betraying, at best, my ridiculous human vanity and, at worst, a therapy-thwarting lack of candor.

Actually, Kaa Lotcharre wore a cap, a kind of yarmulke, but he, Al, and Gilneta clamored for me to shed the military uniform in which the ztun had tweezered me aboard their ship. Eventually, I gave in. What else could I do?

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Instantly, the jellyfish from Groombridge 34 orbited my bipedal self, swimming about me as if in water rather than air. Seyj sent her head over to ogle me, and Al palpated me from neck to knee as I indignantly squirmed. Kaa Lotcharre shrugged seven times, eyeing me from afar.

"I presume that's your reproductive unit," he said. "But on the basis of its shape, not on its size."

Pate to pediment, I flushed a bioluminescent red.

Seyj's head rebounded back to her flickering otterine form. "Ornament yourself again, Draper," she said. "You're not really hiding much, and after our last few sessions, I no longer relish playing the bully."

I obeyed, not so much out of embarrassment as from a sudden-onset chill, and I never appeared before them again minus my military blues. Which made me wonder just how "civilized" they could be, if none of their species had hit upon the concept of clothes for fashion, warmth, and intimidation.

AND SO, MEETING and sleeping, sleeping and meeting, we passed our time aboard the ztun ship, *Conquistador*. The ties among us hired warmongers and genocidal maniacs grew tighter, more profound. Before my abduction, I would *never* have believed that the tidal dependencies of a jellyfish could elicit my sympathy, that the spiritual longings of an off-red slab of granite could influence my own, or that a whiff of lizard could render me maudlin. Which proves that astonishing links exist among the sentient creatures in our galaxy, and that even mercenary paladins from different planets pine for interspecies amity.

Although we never shared a meal — the ztun had foreseen major problems in our doing so — we shared our hang-ups and hopes, and we strove to forge a humane unitary personality from our separate barbaric faults.

Over time, we even touched one another in our suspension berths, via disorienting dreams, a few of which suggested the work of Hollywood & Whine vid directors. I often got on Bacmudsorak's frequency, and occasionally on Kaa Lotcharre's. Owing to their dreams, I soon understood that the caterpillar regarded metamorphosis as a personality-annihilating form of death, and that the Big Slab had a petrifying existential horror of

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the end of the universe, which it saw as nigh and certain rather than far off and theoretical. I mean, some of this stuff we had never even *talked* about. In dreams begin derangements, I guess, and although none of us greatly minded getting to know our therapy mates better through our nightmares, we soon began to resist Counselor Ztang's commands to wrap up our regular sessions and to return to our beds.

"You're acting like sprouts," Ztang scolded. "Putting off bedtime for as long as you childishly can."

So off we'd slink to our coffins, where Al dreamt of cannibalizing a head that he had cut off, Seyj emitted bursts of psychic energy that crisped our nerve endings, and Gilneta broadcast visions of juvenile polyps attacking leviathans in underwater grottoes as roomy as outdoor rodeo arenas. And we all quivered in unison, full of fret and dread — not to mention longing for a *regular* group-therapy session.

Then, during one such meeting (until that point, trauma-free), poor Gilneta up and died. One moment the medusa drifted about in the mother-of-pearl mist; the next, her tentacles dropped, her bell collapsed, and she plunged like a defective parachute. The spray that Ztang used to neutralize our competing stinks failed, and the cabin filled with an odor commingling the scents of rum, kelp, and necrotic coconut meat.

Everyone froze — even Bacmudsorak looked a bit more rigid than usual — until Lotcharre inched across the floor and disposed of Gilneta's corpse by eating it. This act struck none of us as disrespectful, owing to the reverence with which Lotcharre ate and our own lack of relish for seafood.

After this incident, Bacmudsorak's nightmares worsened. Most of these dreams put the slab at their center: It turned red as lava, for example, and flowed downhill into a quenching pit; or broke into crystals as tiny as frost filaments and melted; or eroded over centuries into squishy sea sand. Then, in a nightmare of my own, Bacmudsorak set itself up in my old hometown as a tombstone:

GENERAL MYRON "PIT BULL" DRAPER
R.I.P.

I could not wake up. In fact, I would have died in my sleep if Lotcharre had not projected at me a dream in which the caterpillar did a clumsy

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impersonation of the Hindu goddess Kali. Then he grabbed a hookah and blew smoke rings. These rings had started to turn red, blue, and yellow, and to fuse into butterfly wings, when I finally slid out of nightmare and back into picture-free sleep.

At our next session, Ztang delivered a lecture. He informed us, brusquely, that our death fears were foolish and that Gilneta's demise should comfort rather than bum us out. Ztun science had discovered that our expanding universe was closed rather than open, and this fact meant that the universe would not diffuse into "a tenuous blanket of matter and antimatter debris," via the deterministic engines of the heat-death hypothesis, but would "cease its outward motion and contract." This action, in turn, would one day lead to a new Big Bang and the prospect of a fresh cycle of star making and civilization building.

I said, "Then we ought to call it the Big Boomerang!"

Nobody congratulated me on my coinage. (Maybe our scarabs had failed to find good equivalencies for *boomerang*.) Indeed, Bacmudsorak protested that, by *its* species' calculations, the universe lacked sufficient matter to generate the gravity necessary to prevent it from expanding forever. Lacking such a brake, the universe would never end, but persist unto eternity, in ever-widening, frigid darkness. Gilneta's death had made Bacmudsorak profoundly aware of this fact, and Ztang's recitation of a more optimistic formula for the fate of the universe could not persuade the Big Slab to renounce the real truth as it perceived it.

Ztang argued that although most other species' astronomers had failed to account for as much as ninety percent of the universe's mass, the ztun knew with certainty that dark matter and dark energy sufficient to halt and reverse universal expansion actually existed. This dark matter, he told us, consisted of particles that do not influence nuclear reactions, i.e., neutrinos, WIMPs (weakly interactive massive particles), and hypothetical quantum-level *ztun ztones*. The dark energy, on the other hand, arose not only from a tangle of fields dispersed throughout the vacuum at the subatomic stratum, but also from the hidden gravity-imparting properties of the angst of God.

"*The angst of God?*" we captives chorused.

"Precisely." Counselor Ztang explained that although the religions of

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many sentient creatures either denied the need for a creation-triggering deity or held that God would "never suffer angst," the ztun had authenticated God's existence and conducted experiments confirming the prominence of divine dread among those dark energies still undetected by *our* species. And it was divine dread — the angst of God — that would keep the cosmos from slipping into ceaseless entropic decrepitude.

Silence — a localized entropic decrepitude — greeted Ztang's speech. We captives glanced at one another and then at Ztang, hoping that he would document his claim or die as our poor jellyfish had done. Ultimately, Lotcharre asked Ztang what the alleged deity had to feel any angst about?

"The unrelieved, inventive brutality of intelligent creatures against their own kind." Ztang looked at me and added, "The inhumanity of humanity, if you will, to its very self."

Ouch, I thought. Lotcharre lifted his seventh arm, as if saluting God, and with his other six arms embraced himself. Seyj's head faded from view, and the scorch of fried plastic wafted from her body. Al hunkered down like a lizard on a rock, and the mica in Bacmudsorak's topside maniacally twinkled.

"Now, do you see why we intervened in your worlds' affairs?" Ztang asked self-righteously.

Oh, man. I hated Ztang in this mode. Although I nodded, I tuned him out to think of what I most missed about my previous life: brown-nosing aides-de-camp, taking my paychecks in foldable cash, and net-surfing for pink shoes.

Bacmudsorak began to thrum, broadcasting to each of us, Ztang included, a beat that made our internal fluids ebb and flow erratically. "You want to lessen God's angst," the rock said.

"Right," Ztang said. "Very good."

"And by lessening God's angst, you will diminish the supply of dark energy at large in the universe."

"Maybe," Ztang said warily.

"And by lessening this dark energy," Bacmudsorak pursued, "you will guarantee the open-endedness of the cosmos, its heat death, and the suffocation of every contingent intelligence but God's."

"No." Ztang's various yellow pods had already begun to mottle.

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"Yes," Bacmudsorak said. "Logic leads to a single conclusion, namely, that the ztun have aligned themselves with entropy and against the — "

I blurted, "*The force that through the green fuse drives the flower.*" Where had this line come from? Oh, yeah: from a postcoital session with Eustace Bobeck in a cabin at Camp David. She had written her masters thesis on Dylan Thomas.

Ignorant of my sources, Bacmudsorak finished its own sentence: "And against the powers of life and regeneration."

What can I say? That was the last time the slab of granite from Lacaille 9352 met with us as a responsive entity. At our next meeting, Ztang had Al, Seyj, Lotcharre, and me sit around Bacmudsorak in its common default mode, that of a tabletop. We did not session, however. We played five-card stud, praying that no one would piss Ztang off again. Once, Lotcharre laid down his best hand with a loud slap, but our rebuking looks dissuaded him from taking the pot.

When we finally arrived on the ztun home world, the ztun stunned us again by canceling their reeducation programs. I went to work as a consultant to the producers of a mass entertainment about armed conflict, whom I introduced to the transgressive pleasures of gunplay and sensational explosions. We had so many pods, flowers, and stems flying around the set that you would have thought we were using a Salad Shooter.

The next day the director fired me, and I went into full-time begging mode, asking the government for return passage to Earth. Eventually, the Powers That Be relented and by light cruiser sent me home.

Here on Earth, everything had changed, and changed again. Even so, my fellow Western Hemispherites took me to their bosoms and appointed me to direct their Self-Defense Legions. The Easties soon picked a fight, and tomorrow an all-out war will likely begin. Still, but for the unfortunate angst of God, I could say, "Life is good, my compatriots," for I have work to do, a pet man-o'-war in my heated swimming pool, and a garden full of outsized purple hollyhocks.

— for George Alec Effinger

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In addition to the dozen stories she has contributed to our pages, M. Rickert has also published stories in The Ontario Review, Ideomancer, *and* Rabid Transit, *as well as reprints in several "Year's Best" anthologies. About this new story, she says that if you drive around and around in upstate New York, if you seek it without seeking it, you might — might — after many years find a museum that resembles the one described in this story...but the rest of this tale of purely a product of the author's imagination.*

Cold Fires

By M. Rickert

IT WAS SO COLD THAT daggered ice hung from the eaves with dangerous points that broke off and speared the snow in the afternoon Sun, only to be formed again the next morning. Snowmobile shops and ski rental stores, filled with brightly polished snowmobiles and helmets and skis and poles and wool knitted caps and mittens with stars stitched on them and down jackets and bright-colored boots stood frozen at the point of expectation when that first great snow fell on Christmas night and everyone thought that all that was needed for a good winter season was a good winter snow, until the cold reality set in and the employees munched popcorn or played cards in the back room because it was so cold that no one even wanted to go shopping, much less ride a snowmobile. Cars didn't start but heaved and ticked and remained solidly immobile, stalagmites of ice holding them firm. Motorists called Triple A and Triple A's phone lines became so crowded they routed the calls to a trucking company in Pennsylvania where a woman with a very stressed voice answered the calls with the curt suggestion that the caller hang up and dial again.

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It was so cold dogs barked to go outside, and immediately barked to come back in, and then barked to go back out again; frustrated dog owners leashed their pets and stood shivering in the snow as shivering dogs lifted icy paws, walking in a kind of Irish dance, spinning in that dog circle thing, trying to find the perfect spot to relieve themselves while dancing high paws to keep from freezing to the ground.

It was so cold birds fell from the sky like tossed rocks, frozen except for their tiny eyes which focused on the Sun as if trying to understand its betrayal.

That night the ice hung so heavy from the power lines that they could no longer maintain the electric arc and the whole state went black, followed within the hour by the breakdown of the phone lines. Many people would have a miserable night but the couple had a wood-burning stove. It crackled with flame that bit the dry and brittle birch and consumed the chill air where even in the house they had been wearing coats and scarves that they removed as the hot aura expanded. It was a good night for soup, heated on the cast iron stove and scenting the whole house with rosemary and onion; a good night for wine, the bottle of red they bought on their honeymoon and had been saving for a special occasion, and it was a good night to sit by the stove on the floor, their backs resting against the couch pillows, watching the candles flicker in the waves of heat while the house cracked and heaved beneath its thick iced roof. They decided to tell stories, the sort of stories that only the cold and the fire, the wind and the silent dark combined could make them tell.

"I grew up on an island," she said, "well, you know that. I've already told you about the smell of salt and how it still brings the sea to my breath, how the sound of bathwater can make me weep, how before the birds fell from the sky like thrown rocks, the dark arc of their wings, in certain light, turned white and how certain tones of metal, a chain being dragged by a car, a heavy pan that clangs against its lid become the sound of ships and boats leaving the harbor. I've already told you all that, but I think you should know that my family is descended from pirates, we are not decent people, everything we own has been stolen, even who we are, my hair for instance, these blonde curls can be traced not to any relatives for they are all dark and swarthy but to the young woman my great-great-grandfather brought home to his wife, intended as a sort of help-mate but apparently

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quite worthless in the kitchen, though she displayed a certain fondness for anything to do with strawberries, you understand the same fruit I embrace for its short season, oh how they taste of summer, and my youth!

"Now that I have told you this, I may as well tell you the rest. This blonde maid of my great-great-grandfather's house, who could not sew, or cook, or even garden well but who loved strawberries as if they gave her life, became quite adept at rejecting any slightly imperfect fruit. She picked through the bowls that Great-great-Grandmother brought in from the garden and tossed those not perfectly swollen or those with seeds too coarse to the dogs who ate them greedily then panted at her feet and became worthless hunters, so enamored were they with the sweet. Only perfect berries remained in the white bowl and these she ate with such a manner of tongue and lips that Great-great-Grandfather who came upon her like that, once by chance and ever after by intention, sitting in the Sun at the wooden kitchen table, the dogs slathering at her feet, sucking strawberries, ordered all the pirates to steal more of the red fruit which he traded unreasonably for until he became quite the laughingstock and the whole family was in ruin.

"But even this was not enough to bring Great-great-Grandfather to his senses and he did what just was not done in those days and certainly not by a pirate who could take whatever woman he desired — he divorced Great-great-Grandmother and married the strawberry girl who, it is said, came to her wedding in a wreath of strawberry ivy, and carried a bouquet of strawberries from which she plucked, even in the midst of the sacred ceremony, red bulbs of fruit which she ate so greedily that when it came time to offer her assent she could only nod and smile bright red lips the color of sin.

"The strawberry season is short and it is said she grew pale and weak in its waning. Great-great-Grandfather took to the high seas and had many adventures, raiding boats where he passed the gold and coffers of jewels, glanced at the most beautiful woman and glanced away (so that later, after the excitement had passed, these same woman looked into mirrors to see what beauty had been lost) and went instead, quite eagerly, to the kitchen where he raided the fruit. He became known as a bit of a kook.

"In the meantime, the villagers began to suspect that the strawberry girl was a witch. She did not appreciate the gravity of her situation but

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continued to visit Great-great-Grandmother's house as if the other woman was her own mother and not the woman whose husband she had stolen. It is said that Great-great-Grandmother sicced the dogs on her but they saw the blonde curls and smelled her strawberry scent and licked her fingers and toes and came back to the house with her, tongues hanging out and grinning doggedly at Great-great-Grandmother who, it is said, then turned her back on the girl who was either so naïve or so cunning that she spoke in a rush about her husband's long departures, the lonely house on the hill, the dread of coming winter, a perfect babble of noise and nonsense that was not affected by Great-great-Grandmother's cold back until, the villagers said, the enchantment became perfect and she and Great-great-Grandmother were seen walking the cragged hills to market days as happy as if they were mother and daughter or two old friends and perhaps this is where it would have all ended, a confusion of rumor and memory, were it not for the strange appearance of the rounded bellies of both women and the shocking news that they both carried Great-great-Grandfather's child which some said was a strange coincidence and others said was some kind of trick.

"Great-great-Grandfather's ship did not return when the others did and the other pirate wives did not offer this strawberry one any condolences. He was a famous seaman, and it was generally agreed that he had not drowned, or crashed his ship at the lure of sirens, but had simply abandoned his witchy wife.

"All that winter Great-great-Grandfather's first and second wives grew suspiciously similar bellies, as if size were measured against size to keep an even girth. At long last the strawberry wife took some minor interest in hearth and home and learned to bake bread that Great-great-Grandfather's wife said would be more successfully called crackers, and soup that smelled a bit too ripe but which the dogs seemed to enjoy. During this time Great-great-Grandmother grew curls, and her lips, which had always seemed a mastless ship anchored to the plane of her face, became strawberry shaped. By spring when the two were seen together, stomachs returned to corset size, and carrying between them a bald, blue-eyed baby, they were often mistaken for sisters. The villagers even became confused about which was the witch and which, the bewitched.

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"About this time, in the midst of a hushed ongoing debate amongst the villagers regarding when to best proceed with the witch burning (after the baby, whose lineage was uncertain, had been weaned seemed the general consensus) Great-great-Grandfather returned and brought with him a shipload of strawberries. The heavy scent drove the dogs wild. Great-great-Grandfather drove the villagers mad with strawberries and then, when the absolute height of their passion had been aroused, stopped giving them away and charged gold for them, a plan that was whispered in his ears by the two wives while he held his baby who sucked on strawberries the way other babies sucked on tits.

"In this way, Great-great-Grandfather grew quite rich and built a castle shaped like a ship covered in strawberry vines and with a room at the back, away from the sea, which was made entirely of glass and housed strawberries all year. He lived there with the two wives and the baby daughter and nobody is certain who is whose mother in our family line.

"Of course she did not stay but left one night, too cruel and heartless to even offer an explanation. Great-great-Grandfather shouted her name for hours as if she was simply lost until, at last, he collapsed in the strawberry room, crushing the fruit with his large body and rolling in the juice until he was quite red with it and frightening as a wounded animal. His first wife found him there and steered him to a hot bath. They learned to live together again without the strawberry maid. Strangers who didn't know their story often commented on the love between them. The villagers insisted they were both bewitched, the lit candles in the window to guide her return given as evidence. Of course she never did come back."

Outside in the cold night, even the Moon was frozen. It shed a white light of ice over their pale yard and cast a ghost glow into the living room that haunted her face. He studied her as if she were someone new in his life and not the woman he'd known for seven years. Something about that moonglow combined with the firelight made her look strange, like a statue at a revolt.

She smiled down at him and cocked her head. "I tell you this story," she said, "to explain if ever you should wake and find me gone, it is not an expression of lack of affection for you, but rather, her witchy blood that is to be blamed."

"What became of her?"

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"Oh, no one knows. Some say she had a lover, a pirate from a nearby cove, and they left together, sailing the seas for strawberries. Some say she was an enchanted mermaid and returned to the sea. Some say she came to America and was burned at the stake."

"Which do you think is true?"

She leaned back and sighed, closing her eyes. "I think she's still alive," she whispered, "breaking men's hearts, because she is insatiable."

He studied her in repose, a toppled statue while everything burned.

"Now it's your turn," she said, not opening her eyes, and sounding strangely distant. Was that a tear at the corner of her eye? He turned away from her. He cleared his throat.

"All right then. For a while I had a job in Castor, near Rhome, in a small art museum there. I was not the most qualified for the work but apparently I was the most qualified who was willing to live in Castor, population 954, I kid you not. It was a nice little collection, actually. Most of the population of Castor had come through to view the paintings at least once but it was my experience they seemed just as interested in the carpeting, the light fixtures, and the quantity of fish in the river as they were in the work of the old masters. Certainly the museum never saw the kind of popular attention the baseball field hosted, or the bowling lanes just outside of town.

"What had happened was this. In the 1930s Emile Castor, who had made his fortune on sweet cough drops, had decided to build a fishing lodge. He purchased a beautiful piece of forested property at the edge of what was then a small community, and built his 'cabin,' a six-bedroom, three-bath house with four stone hearth fireplaces and large windows that overlooked the river in the backyard. Even though Castor had blossomed to a population of nearly a thousand by the time I arrived, deer still came to drink from that river.

"When Emile Castor died in 1989, he stated in his will that the house be converted into a museum to display his private collection. He bequeathed all his estate to the support of this project. Of course, his relatives, a sister, a few old cousins, and several nieces and nephews, contested this for years, but Mr. Castor was a thorough man and the legalities were tight as a rock. What his family couldn't understand, other than, of course, what they believed was the sheer cruelty of his act, was

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where this love of art had come from. Mr. Castor, who fished and hunted and was known as something of a ladies' man (though he never married), smoked cigars (chased by lemon cough drops), and built his small fortune on his 'masculine attitude,' as his sister referred to it in an archived letter.

"The kitchen was subdivided. A wall was put up which cut an ugly line right down the middle of what had once been a large picture window that overlooked the river. Whoever made this decision and executed it so poorly was certainly no appreciator of architecture. It was ugly and distorted and an insult to the integrity of the place. What remained of the original room became the employee kitchen: a refrigerator, a stove, a large sink, marble countertops, and a tiled mosaic floor. A small stained glass window by Chagall was set beside the remaining slice of larger window. It remained, in spite of the assault it suffered, a beautiful room, and an elaborate employee kitchen for our small staff.

"The other half of the kitchen was now completely blocked off and inaccessible other than by walking through the employee kitchen. That, combined with the large window which shed too much light to expose any works of art to, had caused this room to develop into a sort of oversized storage room. It was a real mess when I got there.

"The first thing I did was sort through all that junk, unearthing boxes of outdated pamphlets and old stationery, a box of old toilet paper and several boxes of old Castor photographs which I carried to my office to be catalogued and preserved. After a week or so of this I found the paintings, box after box of canvasses painted by an amateur hand, quite bad, almost at the level of a school child, without a child's whimsy, and all of the same woman. I asked Darlene, who acted as bookkeeper, ticket taker, and town gossip what she thought of them.

"'That must be Mr. Castor's work,' she said.

"'I didn't know he painted.'

"'Well he did, you can see for yourself. Folks said he was nuts about painting out here. Are they all like these?'

"'More or less.'

"'Should have stuck to cough drops,' she pronounced. (This from a woman who once confided in me her absolute glee at seeing a famous jigsaw puzzle, glued and framed, hanging in some restaurant in a nearby town.)

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"When all was said and done we had fifteen boxes of those paintings and I decided to hang them in the room that was half of what had once been a magnificent kitchen. Few people would see them there, and that seemed right; they really were quite horrid. The sunlight could cause no more damage than their very presence already exuded.

"When they were at last all hung, I counted a thousand, various shapes and sizes of the same dark-haired, gray-eyed lady painted in various styles, the deep velvet colors of Renaissance, the soft pastel hues of Baroque, some frightening bright green reminiscent of Matisse, and strokes that swirled wildly from imitation of van Gogh to the thick direct lines of a grade schooler. I stood in the waning evening light staring at this grotesquerie, this man's art, his poor art, and I must admit I was moved by it. Was his love any less than that of the artist who painted well? Some people have talent. Some don't. Some people have a love that can move them like this. One thousand faces, all imperfectly rendered, but attempted nonetheless. Some of us can only imagine such devotion.

"I had a lot of free time in Castor. I don't like to bowl. I don't care for greasy hamburgers. I have never been interested in stock car racing or farming. Let's just say I didn't really fit in. I spent my evenings cataloguing Emile Castor's photographs. Who doesn't like a mystery? I thought the photographic history of this man's life would yield some clues about the object of his affection. I was quite excited about it actually, until I became quite weary with it. You can't imagine what it's like to look through one man's life like that, family, friends, trips, beautiful women (though none were her). The more I looked at them, the more depressed I grew. It was clear Emile Castor had really lived his life and I, I felt, was wasting mine. Well, I am given to fits of melancholy, as you well know, and such a fit rooted inside me at this point. I could not forgive myself for being so ordinary. Night after night I stood in that room of the worst art ever assembled in one place and knew it was more than I had ever attempted, the ugliness of it all somehow more beautiful than anything I had ever done.

"I decided to take a break. I asked Darlene to come in, even though she usually took weekends off, to oversee our current high school girl, Eileen something or other, who seemed to be working through some kind of teenage hormonal thing because every time I saw her she appeared to have

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just finished a good cry. She was a good kid, I think, but at the time she depressed the hell out of me. 'She can't get over what happened between her and Randy,' Darlene told me. 'The abortion really shook her up. But don't say anything to her parents. They don't know.'

"'Darlene, I don't want to know.'

"Eventually it was settled. I was getting away from Castor and all things Castor related. I'd booked a room in a B&B in Sundale, on the shore. My duffel bag was packed with two novels, plenty of sunscreen, shorts and swimwear and flip-flops. I would sit in the Sun. Walk along the shore. Swim. Read. Eat. I would not think about Emile Castor or the gray-eyed woman. Maybe I would meet somebody. Somebody real. Hey, anything was possible now that I was getting away from Castor.

"Of course it rained. It started almost as soon as I left town and at times the rain became so heavy that I had to pull over on the side of the road. When I finally got to the small town on the shore I was pretty wiped out. I drove in circles looking for the ironically named 'Sunshine Bed and Breakfast' until in frustration at the eccentricity of small towns, I decided that the pleasant-looking house with the simple sign 'B&B' must be it. I sat in the car for a moment hoping the rain would give me a break, and craned my neck at the distant looming steeple of a small chapel on the cliff above the roiling waters.

"It was clear the rain would continue its steady torrent, so I grabbed my duffel bag and slopped through the puddles in a sort of half trot, and entered a pleasant foyer of classical music, overstuffed chairs, a wide-eyed calico asleep in a basket on a table and a large painting of, you probably already guessed, Emile Castor's gray-eyed beauty. Only in this rendition she really was. Beautiful. This artist had captured what Emile had not. It wasn't just a portrait, a photograph with paint if you will, no, this painting went beyond its subject's beauty into the realm of what is beautiful in art. I heard footsteps, deep breathing, a cough. I turned with reluctance and beheld the oldest man I'd ever seen. He was a lace of wrinkles and skin that sagged from his bones like an ill-fitting suit. He leaned on a walking stick and appraised me with gray eyes almost lost in the fold of wrinkles.

"'A beautiful piece of work,' I said.

"He nodded.

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"I introduced myself and after a few confused minutes discovered that I was neither in Sundale nor at the Sunshine B&B. But I could not have been more pleased on any sunny day, in any location, than I was there, especially when I found out I could stay the night. When I asked about the painting and its subject, Ed, as he told me to call him, invited me to join him in the parlor for tea after I had "settled in."

"My room was pleasant, cozy and clean without the creepy assortment of teddy bears too often assembled in B&Bs. From the window I had a view of the roiling sea, gray waves, the mournful swoop of seagulls and the cliff with the white chapel, its tall steeple tipped, not with a cross, but a ship, its great sails unfurled.

"When I found him in the parlor, Ed had a tray of tea and cookies set out on a low table before the fireplace which was nicely ablaze. The room was pleasant and inviting. The cold rain pounded the windows but inside it was warm and dry, the faint scent of lavender in the air.

"'Come, come join us.' Ed waved his hand, as arthritic as any I've ever seen, gnarled to almost a paw. I sat in the green wing chair across from him. An overstuffed rocking chair made a triangle of our seating arrangement but it was empty; not even the cat sat there.

"'Theresa!' he shouted, and he shouted again in a loud voice that reminded me of the young Marlon Brando calling for Stella.

"It occurred to me he might not be completely sane. But at the same moment I thought this I heard a woman's voice and the sound of footsteps approaching from the other end of the house. I confess that for a moment I entertained the notion that it would be the gray-eyed woman, as if I had fallen into a Brigadoon of sorts, a magical place time could not reach, all time-ravaged evidence on Ed's face to the contrary.

"Just then that old face temporarily lost its wrinkled look and took on a divine expression. I followed the course of his gaze and saw the oldest woman in the world entering the room. I rose from my seat.

"'Theresa,' Ed said, "'Mr. Delano of Castor.'

"I strode across the room and offered my hand. She slid into it a small soft glove of a hand and smiled at me with green eyes. She walked smoothly and with grace but her steps were excruciatingly small and slow. To walk beside her was a lesson in patience, as we traversed the distance to Ed who had taken to pouring the tea with hands that quivered so badly

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the china sounded like wind chimes. How had these two survived so long? In the distance, a cuckoo sang and I almost expected I would hear it again before we reached our destination.

"'Goodness,' she said, when I finally stood beside the rocking chair, "I've never known a young man to walk so slowly.' She sat in the chair swiftly, and without any assistance on my part. I realized she'd been keeping her pace to mine as I thought I was keeping mine to hers. I turned to take my own seat and Ed grinned up at me, offering in his quivering hand, a chiming tea and saucer, which I quickly took.

"'Mr. Delano is interested in Elizabeth,' Ed said as he extended another jangling cup and saucer to her. She reached across and took it, leaning out of the chair in a manner I thought unwise.

"'What do you know about her?' she asked.

"'Mr. Emile Castor has made several, many, at least a thousand paintings of the same woman but nothing near to the quality of this one. That's all I know. I don't know what she was to him. I don't know anything.'

"Ed and Theresa both sipped their tea. A look passed between them. Theresa sighed. 'You tell him, Ed.'

"'It begins with Emile Castor arriving in town, a city man clear enough in his red roadster and with a mustache.'

"'But pleasant.'

"'He knew his manners.'

"'He was a sincerely pleasant man.'

"'He drove up to the chapel and like the idiot he mostly was, turns his back on it and sets up his easel and begins to try to paint the water down below.'

"'He wasn't an idiot. He was a decent man, and a good businessman. He just wasn't an artist.'

"'He couldn't paint water either.'

"'Well, water's difficult.'

"'Then it started to rain.'

"'You seem to get a lot.'

"'So finally he realizes there's a church right behind him and he packs up his puddle of paints and goes inside.'

"'That's when he sees her.'

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"'Elizabeth?'

"'No. Our Lady. Oh, Mr. Delano, you really must see it.'

"'Maybe he shouldn't.'

"'Oh, Edward, why shouldn't he?'

"Edward shrugs. 'He was a rich man so he couldn't simply admire her without deciding that he must possess her as well. That's how the rich are.'

"'Edward, we don't know Mr. Delano's circumstances.'

"'He ain't rich.'

"'Well, we don't really — '

"'All you gotta do is look at his shoes. You ain't, are you?'

"'No.'

"'Can you imagine being so foolish you don't think nothing of trying to buy a miracle?'

"'A miracle? No.'

"'Well, that's how rich he was.'

"'He stayed on while he tried to convince the church to sell it to him.'

"'Idiot.'

"'They fell in love.'

"Ed grunted.

"'They did. They both did.'

"'He offered a couple a barrels full of money.'

"'For the painting.'

"'I gotta say I do believe some on the church board wavered a bit but the women wouldn't hear of it.'

"'She is a miracle.'

"'Yep, that's what all the women folk said.'

"'Edward, you know it's true. More tea, Mr. Delano?'

"'Yes. Thank you. I'm not sure I'm following....'

"'You haven't seen it yet, have you?'

"'Theresa, he just arrived.'

"'We saw some of those other paintings he did of Elizabeth.'

"Ed snorts.

"'Well, he wasn't a quitter, you have to give him that.'

"Ed bites into a cookie and glares at the teapot.

"'What inspired him, well, what inspired him was Elizabeth but what kept him at it was Our Lady.'

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"'So are you saying, do you mean to imply that this painting, this Our Lady is magical?'

"'Not magic, a miracle.'

"'I'm not sure I understand.'

"'It's an icon, Mr. Delano, surely you've heard of them?'

"'Well, supposedly an icon is not just a painting, it is the holy manifested in the painting, basically.'

"'You must see it. Tomorrow. After the rain stops.'

"'Maybe he shouldn't.'

"'Why do you keep saying that, Edward? Of course he should see it.'

"Ed just shrugged.

"'Of course we didn't sell it to him and over time he stopped asking. They fell in love.'

"'He wanted her instead.'

"'Don't make it sound like that. He made her happy during what none of us knew were the last days of her life.'

"'After she died, he started the paintings.'

"'He wanted to keep her alive.'

"'He wanted to paint an icon.'

"'He never gave up until he succeeded. Finally, he painted our Elizabeth.'

"'Are you saying Emile Castor painted that, in the foyer?'

"'It took years.'

"'He wanted to keep her alive somehow.'

"'But that painting, it's quite spectacular and his other work is so — "

"'Lousy.'

"'Anyone who enters this house wants to know about her.'

"'I don't mean to be rude, but how did she, I'm sorry, please excuse me.'

"'Die?'

"'It doesn't matter.'

"'Of course it does. She fell from the church cliff. She'd gone up there to light a candle for Our Lady, a flame of gratitude. Emile had proposed and she had accepted. She went up there and it started raining while she was inside. She slipped and fell on her way home.'

"'How terrible.'

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"'Oh yes, but there are really so few pleasant ways to die.'

"Our own rain still lashed the windows. The fat calico came into the room and stopped to lick her paws. We just sat there, listening to the rain and the clink of china cup set neatly in saucer. The tea was good and hot. The fire smelled strangely of chocolate. I looked at their two old faces in profile, wrinkled as poorly folded maps. Then I proceeded to make a fool of myself by explaining to them my position as curator of the Castor museum. I described the collection, the beautiful house and location by a stream visited by deer (but I did not describe the dismal town) and ended with a description of Emile's horrible work, the room filled with poor paintings of their daughter, surely, I told them, Elizabeth belonged there, redeemed against the vast assortment of clowns, for the angel she was. When I was finished the silence was sharp. Neither spoke nor looked at me, but even so, as though possessed by some horrible tic, I continued. 'Of course we'd pay you handsomely.' Theresa bowed her head and I thought that perhaps this was the posture she took for important decisions until I realized she was crying.

"Ed turned slowly, his old head like a marionette's on an uncertain string. He fixed me with a look that told me what a fool I was and will always be.

"'Please accept my apology for being so....' I said, finding myself speaking and rising as though driven by the same puppeteer's hand. 'I can't tell you how.... Thank you.' I turned abruptly and walked out of the room, angry at my clumsy social skills, in despair actually, that I had made a mess of such a pleasant afternoon. I intended to hurry to my room and read my book until dinner when I would skulk down the stairs and try to find a decent place to eat. That I could insult and hurt two such kind people was unforgivable. I was actually almost blind with self-loathing until I entered the foyer and saw her out of the corner of my eye.

"It is really quite impossible to describe that other thing that brings a painting beyond competent, even beyond beauty into the realm of great art. Of course she was a beautiful woman; of course the lighting, colors, composition, brushstroke, all of these elements could be separated and described, but this still did not account for that ethereal feeling, the sense one gets standing next to a masterpiece, the need to take a deep breath as if suddenly the air consumed by one is needed for two.

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"Instead of going upstairs, I went out the front door. If this other painting was anything like the one of Elizabeth, then I must see it.

"It was dark, the rain only a drizzle now, the town a slick black oil, maybe something by Dali with disappearing ink. I had, out of habit, pocketed my car keys. I had to circle the town a few times, make a few false starts, once finding myself in someone's driveway, before I selected the road that arched above the town to the white chapel, which even in the rain glowed as though lit from within. The road was winding but not treacherous. When I got to the top and stood on that cliff the wind whipped me, the town below was lost in a haze of fog that only a few yellow lights shone through. I had the sensation of looking down on the heavens from above. The waves crashed and I felt the salt on my face, tasted it on my lips. Up close the chapel was much larger than it looked from below, the steeple that narrowed to a needle point on which its ship balanced into the dark sky, quite imposing. As I walked up those stone steps I thought again of Edward saying he wasn't sure I should see it. I reached for the hammered iron handle and pulled. For a moment I thought it was locked, but it was just incredibly heavy. I pulled the door open and entered the darkness of the church. Behind me, the door heaved shut. I smelled a flowery smoky scent, the oily odor of wood, and heard from somewhere a faint drip of water as though there was a leak. I was in the church foyer, there was another door before me, marked in the darkness by the thin line of light that shone beneath it. I walked gingerly, uncertain in the dark. It too was extremely heavy. I pulled it open."

He coughed and cleared his throat as though suddenly suffering a cold. She opened her eyes just a slit. The heat from the wood stove must have been the reason for the red in his cheeks, how strange he looked, as though in pain or fever! She let her eyes droop shut and it seemed a long time before he continued, his voice raspy.

"All I can say is, I never should have looked. I wish I'd never seen either of those paintings. It was there that I made myself the promise I would never settle for a love any less than spectacular, a love so great that it would take me past my limitations, the way Emile's love for Elizabeth had taken him past his, that somehow such a love would leave an imprint on the world, the way great art does, that all who saw it would be changed by it, as I was.

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"So you see, when you find me sad and ask what's on my mind, or when I am quiet and cannot explain to you the reason, there it is. If I had never seen the paintings, maybe I would be a happy man. But always, now, I wonder."

She waited but he said no more. After a long time, she whispered his name. But he did not answer and when she peeked at him from the squint of her eyes, he appeared to be asleep. Eventually, she fell asleep too.

All that night, as they told their stories, the flames burned heat onto that icy roof which melted down the sides of the house and over the windows so that in the cold morning when they woke up, the fire gone to ash and cinder, the house was encased in a sort of skin of ice which they tried to alleviate by burning another fire, not realizing they were only sealing themselves in more firmly. They spent the rest of that whole winter in their ice house. By burning all the wood and most of the furniture and eating canned food even if it was out of date, they survived, thinner and less certain of fate, into a spring morning thaw, though they never could forget those winter stories, not all that spring or summer and especially not that autumn, when the winds began to carry that chill in the leaves, that odd combination of Sun and decay, about which they did not speak, but which they knew would exist between them forever.

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

THE TOWN HOLLYWOOD COULDN'T FORGET

THERE ARE stories that are timeless and others that are timely. The former tend to get more respect, but I've never understood why. Predicating a narrative upon "classic" motifs and archetypal characters is actually easier than painting a vivid and insightful portrait of one's own moment of time. Zeitgeist shifts so rapidly, and since our 24/7 media-society is always in a constant frenzy of instant analysis and self-parody, it is especially tricky to pull off anything close to social satire.

When a writer or filmmaker does capture the moment, it often challenges the reader or viewer in ways a timeless fable never could. At that moment, it pushes people's buttons forcefully. Years later, someone who experiences the same work might not have the same love it/hate it gut reaction, might even perceive the work as "dated," but they can still appreciate the story as a snapshot of the social landscape of an earlier time.

The Stepford Wives is such a story. Whether Ira Levin was, as I have heard, inspired by a trip to a Disney theme park in the midst of a relationship breakup, is beside the point. His 1972 novella was actually an ahead-of-the-curve study of the male "backlash" mentality, even before the media had put a name to the phenomenon.

In that slim horror tale, a college-educated young mother named Joanna Eberhart moves to a prosperous Connecticut suburb with her husband and their two children. By page two of the story, Joanna is already alarmed by the obsessive domesticity of the women in her new community, so she pointedly tells the Welcome Wagon lady and town paper columnist that she is

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both a semi-professional photographer and a woman with interests in "politics and in the Women's Liberation movement." She claims that her husband shares those interests. And, indeed, Walter Eberhart appears to be a forward-thinking man of his time.

But appearances are deceiving, especially in gender politics. As one by one the few other independently minded women in Stepford are transformed into floor-scrubbing drones excessively and selflessly devoted to the care and feeding of their husbands' appetites and egos, Joanna becomes increasingly suspicious of the men of the town. As for her own caring husband, she realizes too late that Walter is true to type, but not to the flesh-and-blood woman he married.

Those who didn't dismiss Mr. Levin's slim story about a town of replicant homemakers as a meaningless potboiler often got a bit hot and bothered about the social commentary therein. He was accused of being anti-male and conversely charged with being anti-feminist...a sure sign that he was indeed saying something about gender relations in the early seventies (even if no one could quite figure out *what* that something was).

Likewise a few souls were upset with screenwriter William Goldman and director Bryan Forbes for their relatively faithful screen adaptation in 1975. Some were outraged that men were demonized in the story. Others saw it as anti-woman or, as Betty Friedan was reported to have viewed it, a "rip-off of the women's movement." Either way, it was certainly a movie of its time, naturalistic but creepy. Katharine Ross played the long-haired, doe-eyed hippie housewife heroine fairly well. (Although with her somewhat flat affect, her final transformation was more a triumph of costuming than acting.) As for Peter Masterson (who later became a journeyman director), he was almost too believable as a melancholy modern man who wonders why he has to work so hard at a law office and then come home and have his wife hassle him about how he should be sharing in the childcare duties and housework, and how he shouldn't exclude her from the family decision-making.

William Goldman's screenplay heightens the gender tension of Levin's novel, and improves on the suspense as well as the unsettling shock of its ending. But neither he nor director Forbes could make this a timeless story. No, they made a domestic horror film that is very

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much a picture of its very precise seventies cultural moment.

Which makes you wonder why the story has been tweaked and altered and remade so many times in the last almost thirty years.

First there was the mildly amusing TV movie called *Revenge of the Stepford Wives*. Although the chief villain was still the dignified but ominous head of the local Men's Association, Diz (Arthur Hill, taking over from big-screen counterpart Patrick O'Neal), it was no longer a tale of robotic replacement wives. Presumably because they were hoping for a more hopeful conclusion — or at least one that would allow *real* women to take their revenge on male villainy — the first remake altered the men's m.o.

Instead of automatronic substitutes, the local husbands opt for mind control and pill-popping. When TV producer and all-around uppity gal Kaye Foster (pants-wearing Sharon Gless) comes to Stepford to profile the low-crime, low-divorce suburban utopia for her TV news magazine, she immediately becomes suspicious. With the help of a brash newcomer, Megan (Julie Kavner), they investigate why every woman in town seems to have a thyroid condition that requires them to take medication every time a siren blasts throughout the day.

Eventually, Megan is also transformed into an uber-hausfrau through a process that involves a brainwashing device that looks suspiciously like a pink salon hairdryer. (At the end of the process, she's a frilly clean-freak, but as you can imagine, the fabulous Ms. Kavner couldn't look like a Barbie, even when she tries.) At this point, Kaye's main purpose is to save her new friend from a fate worse than death, which is to say, a wardrobe of long gingham frocks and floppy hats.

Played as straight suspense, *Revenge of the Stepford Wives* now plays as an accidental comedy for its loopy plot devices and bizarre casting. (Would you believe Don Johnson as Julie Kavner's earnest rookie cop husband?) Still, even this odd sequel manages some incidental social pulse-taking, as it seems to acknowledge that career women are here to stay and that women aren't nearly as easy to control as men would hope.

Skipping over *The Stepford Children* (1987), which is a variation about parental control instead of gender relations, the next remake was, you guessed it, *The Stepford Husbands* (1996), a rather pathetic inversion of the original story in

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which a nasty social matron (dear typecast Louise Fletcher) and her psychologist crony help the women of Stepford turn their immature, sports-watching husbands into sensitive guys who like to cuddle and cook.

Laughable without being the least bit fun, *Husbands* stars Donna Mills as a career woman who loves her very cranky, self-pitying hubby (Michael Ontkean) just the way he is. It is telling that the wife here is totally non-complicit with the softening of her mate. When she finds out about the abusive therapy and psychotropic drugs that are being used on her newly sympathetic guy, she immediately tries to get him out of town. The overall message seems to be that real men truly don't eat quiche and if they are ill-tempered, rude to your friends, and bounce a basketball in the house incessantly, then that's the kind of manly man you want to keep and preserve.

If that TV flick says something about the nineties, I shudder to think what it is. All it said to me was that the Stepford saga was completely bankrupt. Done. Due to be permanently retired. But that's just not the way in Hollywood.

Instead playwright, screenwriter, and "female" film reviewer for *Premiere* (under the pseudonym Libby Gelman-Waxner), Paul Rudnick, joined forces with his *In & Out* helmer (and former Yoda and Miss Piggy) Frank Oz to do yet another big-screen version of *The Stepford Wives*.

I'll give the duo points for realizing that there just wasn't a lot of suspense left in the old yarn. So they moved away from nail-biting horror and opted to make a brightly colored cartoon of a social comedy.

If you *had* to make a new version of *The Stepford Wives*, that was certainly the way to go. But if you were going to go in that direction, you needed to follow through with more laughs, more bite, and more gender insights than Rudnick and Oz could muster.

Star power is present and accounted for. Nicole Kidman plays the new Joanna, a brittle, slightly maniacal TV executive with a talent for brutal battle-of-the-sexes reality programming. When she is fired and has a breakdown, complete with electroshock, her devoted husband Walter (Matthew Broderick) moves her and the two kids to a gated community in Connecticut—full of beautiful McMansions, where the men all drive vintage muscle cars and motorcycles, and

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the women all drive expensive SUVs.

Fairly early on in the proceedings, you realize that when it comes to visual gags, this movie has it going on. But it's all so superficial. Set decoration, costuming, and props do not a movie make. And when it comes to deeper social insights, or even deeper belly laughs, this very good-looking film just can't deliver the goods.

The most intriguing thing to explore in a twenty-first-century *Stepford Wives* might have been women's ambivalence toward social power and familial relationships. It's not always angry white guys who want to keep women down. These days, it might actually be a deranged active "choice" by a woman.

After all, from *Fascinating Womanhood* to *The Total Woman* to *The Rules* and the latest preachings of Doctor Laura, male-identified women have often done the best job, in the last quarter century, of undermining women's autonomy. At a time when the media bleats at women to return to the home to happily care for their children, "Extreme Makeover" shows encourage us gals to nip and tuck and enhance our way to interpersonal happiness, and shows like *Sex & the City* seem to suggest that even successful women should dress like cotton-candy Barbies and teeter through the lonely city streets on very expensive, very high heels, gender relations are a lot more complicated. Yet still rife with delicious fresh possibilities for social satire. All of which are ignored by the new *Stepford Wives*.

Oh, it turns out that there is a woman behind the new Stepford plot, but you get the feeling that this was only done to offer a kooky surprise in the final reel. And our mastermind doesn't want to control or oppress, she just wants everyone to be happy. Why she started by giving total fantasy-fulfillment only to the men is a little unclear, as is much of the rest of the movie.

As I've expressed to you many times, a movie's failure to follow its own internal logic is one of the greatest sins a science fiction film can commit. That being the case, it is possible to dismiss *Stepford Wives* as one of the most miserable failures of recent memory. It can't even seem to make up its mind whether the women of Stepford have been replaced with robotics or not!

[Spoiler Alert] On the one hand, the re-engineered wifies are plainly portrayed as bots. They have

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blow-up adjustable boobs, can put their hand on a hot stovetop without pain, and possess the ability to double as an ATM. And if they square-dance with too much enthusiasm, sparks come out of their ears. Still, in the end, the movie changes its mind and says that it was all nothing more than a minor chip implant.

Clearly, this was in service of an upbeat ending. At some point during the rewrite process the filmmakers decided that they wanted their principal female players happily intact during the final coda. So, they decided to make the rest of their movie a lie.

The Stepford Wives is a miserable failure, it is true. It is the result of too many test screenings and not enough originality and commitment on the part of the filmmakers. The film is as fond of the Men's Association cronies who literally objectify their wives as it is of the brassy women-who-do-too-much they victimize. You get the feeling that, above all else, this toothless satire was striving not to offend a single audience segment. In failing to have a viewpoint, it ends up — more than any previous Stepford project — saying absolutely nothing about its moment in time.

But what can I say? It is not a *total* loss. Here and there, it manages to entertain. And to see Bette Midler, Glenn Close, and Christopher Walken hamming it up through a movie together...well, it's almost enough to make it worth watching. Almost.

As for this worn and tattered tale of marital politics in a small New England village, can we agree that it is totally and completely dead now? Over? Done? It's not enough to hope. We need to be protected from the resurrection of Stepford's undead. Somebody grab a stake.

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Two months ago, Mr. Reed provided us with an adventure tale concerning a young Native American boy. Last month, he taught us new tricks for interior designers. Now he brings us something entirely different and unpredictable (well, unpredictable for 16.7% of the market, that is).

And what else can we expect from Mr. Reed? A novel entitled A Well of Stars *is due out early next year — that much we can say. Will he make it four consecutive months in* F&SF*? That remains to be seen, but after this story, any predictions about the future seem, well, impossible.*

Opal Ball

By Robert Reed

SHE IS A PLAYER, LIKE CLIFF. Like him, she is in her early thirties, healthy and single. And like the best in their profession, she is financially secure.

They meet entirely by chance, share a lazy dinner on a whim, and like any two players left to themselves, talk endlessly about the future. Who wins the next presidential race, and assuming her, will she win reelection? When will the next alien transmission arrive, and what treasures, if any, will it hold? (The GrokTrok signal still sits raw on everyone's mind.) Will the world's stock markets continue their steady ascent, or will their gains accelerate? "Accelerate," Cliff decides. But the graph is trimodal, she reminds him; a persistent gloom-and-doom wager is riding on the prolonged plateau. Cliff asks what the Chinese will do about Tibet. She asks what the U.S. will do with Free Alaska. They wonder if the Europa mission will find life, and will the United Council fund the Alpha Centauri mission, and when will the Sun finally extinguish its nuclear fuel. Then with a wink and a sly little grin, Cliff predicts who is going to win the next World Series.

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That brings a hearty laugh from his new friend. Athletics have adapted to the new circumstances: Players and teams are rigorously balanced, while the fields of play have been made wildly chaotic. Each ball has its own weight and distinct shape. Winds are generated on site, gusting and swirling in random directions, while the grass grows and shrivels according to its own whims, and the soil folds into little lumps in all the worst places. With every modern sport, rules reward competitors with enormous scores, and they punish with fat penalties, and predicting the outcome of any game, much less the season, is impossible — which is the only reason people still are willing to cheer for the home team.

Dinner is a joy, and it doesn't take any unique vision to see what happens next. Hours later, lying beneath the perfumed sheets of his new lover's home, Cliff relates his own history as a player: Teachers and his own ego told him that he enjoyed a certain talent with science, so he began there. But he predicted a rapid solution to the telemeres problem with life expansion, and there is none. He wagered heavily on a quantum theory of gravity that subsequently proved to be flawed. And he made a fool of himself in deep-space astronomy, predicting no observable supernova in the Milky Way for the next thirty years. Which seemed perfectly reasonable, he points out, since stars explode infrequently and the last blast was seen just six years before. But wiser souls — real scientists, devoted hobbyists, and a multitude of crafty AIs — correctly assessed both the historic record and the stellar actuarial tables. The recent supernova had been decades behind schedule, and the next one could happen any time. Eighteen months, to be exact. Suddenly money that Cliff had set on a thirty-year shelf was yanked down and divided among wiser players. Which wasn't awful news, of course. It wasn't all that much money, he pretends. But Cliff's greatest failure — a genuine disaster — was his bold prediction that the next alien transmission would come within the newborn year, and it would prove as beneficial as the Sag Prime signal of '37. Both wagers proved to be spectacular mistakes. The sky was silent for the entire year, and then two days too late, the GrokTrok signal finally arrived, bringing the good people of Earth nothing but a gloriously colorful, highly detailed image of an alien's flower-like hind end, brazenly displayed to the camera and to the universe at large.

That's how Cliff got into human prediction, at last. Here was a realm

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with importance as well as important money, and no damned AIs to compete against. ("If machines ever master human dynamics, I'm sunk.") And better still, the young man had a genuine talent for seeing the obvious. "Which of these ten houses would make me happiest? What new activity or sport or hobby should I attempt? Which classic novel fits my soul best? And what sort of man, or woman, should I marry? If I marry anyone, of course." He read the questions on the public boards, and if any tickled his interest, he examined the attached data tail. Biographies begged to be studied, including images and deep glances into these not-so-private lives. Certain questions interested him; who can say why? By various means, he looked past the tail, investigating these distant lives by every legal means. Then he looked again at the person asking for guidance, listening to the play of the voice, observing the tilt of the head and the nervous flicker of an arching eyebrow. That final gaze meant everything. Did he know this soul well enough to offer help? And if so, how much did he want to help? Five dollars' worth, or fifty? Or maybe a fat hundred?

"Prince Randolph was my crowning success," Cliff mentions.

"Truly?" his lover purrs, ignoring the graceless pun.

Being a thoroughly modern man, Randolph had asked the world, "Which girl should I marry?" And the world responded with fascination and fantastic sums of money. Half a dozen candidates were put on public display. The prince's brief life was sliced open and examined in clinical detail. Questions were posted on his public board, and he answered them for everyone to see. Of course old lovers were sought out. A pleasant mother and surly father offered a range of conflicting hopes and opinions. Then Cliff, along with another billion others — a shared intellect scattered across six continents, ten orbital cities, and the Moon — made their final wagers.

"I was one of those billion," his lover admits.

No small coincidence, that.

Then she continues, mentioning, "'None of these girls are worth marrying,' I told the prince."

Which was what Cliff had decided, too. "But I made this substantial side wager," he boasts. "Randolph would settle for happiness and a certain woman twenty years his senior." And sure enough, six months later the heir to the British throne married his one-time nanny, and Cliff was one

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of the six hundred and two players who had seen the future the clearest.

In reward, he received a substantial share from a small ocean of earnings.

"And guess what," his lover purrs. "So did I."

"No," he blurts. "Truly?"

"Truly," she says. Then from the darkness, she asks, "What do you think it means, darling? Two great players coming together like this?"

THE FUTURE HAS ALWAYS been an opaque crystal. Shamans and popes have always seen the obvious, predicting the seasons as well as the inevitabilities of life and death. Then came science and computers, creating experts trained in every narrow field, and the future was a little less opaque. But even the most expert mind, armed with the finest tools, is limited. Is hamstrung. Every mind is finite; bias kills the most gifted visionary; and wishful thinking can do nothing but distort and then blind. It wasn't until humans and their smartest machines began to place wagers, risking money against tomorrow, that the future became a little more knowable, and workable, and for the serious player, a source of financial blood.

Without question, this is a Golden Age. With a multitude of eyes peering into the great Opal Ball, the future is being revealed as never before. And the world has never been as efficient or happy or half as flexible. Which only stands to reason: Unbiased observers have a better chance of predicting wars and economic downturns than do government officials and stock market mavens. No matter how brilliant, the individual is always dim next to the multitude. And no expert of souls and society can give the same shrewd personal advice that is delivered by just a few hundred busybodies looking at your little life.

Cliff is a stellar example:

He was an avid cyclist until strangers did an analysis of his body and muscles, predicting that he'd prefer sculling across open water. It is an obscure sport, and he had no previous interest. But sure enough, he quickly became one of the top thousand scullers in the country, and winning in any sport makes it into a thorough pleasure.

He believed that he adored Bach. But rock-and-roll from the last

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century is his new favorite, thanks to a few hundred invited suggestions.

He always wore blue, but black and white are his natural colors, and changing his wardrobe and the color of his hair has done wonders.

And now, purely by chance, the player-woman has come into his perfect life.

Spent and happy, he drags himself home in the morning. But before he finally sleeps, he turns to the public board, asking the entire world, "Is this the woman meant for me?"

A twenty-four-hour window feels right.

Seed money can spark interest, which is why he places a thousand of his own dollars on YES.

Then Cliff collapses in bed, sleeping hard till evening. And after a quick shower and a stimulant stew, he dresses in black and white before meeting his new love at what has already become their favorite restaurant.

Cliff's honest intention is to listen to the world. To hear its advice and absorb it, acting on its shared wisdom. But he is also in love — utterly, selfishly in love — and through the next night and into the morning hours, he assumes that of course the world will answer with a resounding, "YES."

Yet the world votes, "NO," with a ninety-two percent surety. "She is not and will never be right for you."

Cliff is sitting at home that next morning, exhausted again and this time feeling outraged. What to do, what to do? Finally, he decides to hide the results, at least for the time being. But she is a player — a believer by every measure — and of course she has already asked about Cliff and his worthiness. And the Opal Ball has come to the same unbiased and distinctly negative conclusion.

Her response is a quick and impulsive rage. She flings the stupid results into his face, and she curses a thousand strangers, and in the next breath, she declares, "Let's show them. Let's get married. And I mean right now."

The ceremony seems quicker than the ninety seconds that it takes.

The consequences are instantly apparent, ugly and sad and inescapable. Their first fight lasts an entire day, incandescent words leaving wounds not easily healed. And their last battle never ends. Even after the

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divorce, she and Cliff trade blows and furious looks, and sometimes he finds himself awake in the night, plotting the awful things that he could do to this monster-woman who stole four months out of his otherwise wondrous life.

Cliff vows: Never again will he doubt the advice of distant voices.

With the help of those voices, he remakes his wardrobe and appearance. He lets them select a new larger home to serve his maturing needs. Against every past interest, he takes up topiary gardening and holopainting. And of course both hobbies are wonderful successes. Then he asks the world, "Where should I go on a long vacation?" And a week later, he and his new ocean-ready scull set off on a voyage down the Chilean coast.

While Cliff is busy fighting the stiff ocean currents, his ex-wife dies.

A phone call delivers the news. Later, he learns the ugly particulars. Depressed and drunk, the woman posted her genetics and life history, and then asked the world about her own future. The Opal Ball responded instantly, showing her nothing that seemed overtly appealing. Small victories in the game, brief relationships that always end badly, and a growing tendency for black moods. So with pills and a length of razored rope, she managed to save herself from years of obscurity and disappointment, and the half a hundred players who had predicted suicide quietly pocketed their winnings.

Cliff feels embarrassingly happy for the first moment or two.

Then the sadness bears down, and he spends a full night sobbing wildly, ashamed of his actions and his glaring failures.

In the morning, an AI attorney contacts him. Was Cliff aware that a three-month-old fetus currently sits in cold storage, and that he and the dead woman are the parents?

The news is an enormous, numbing surprise.

"She conceived during your marriage," the machine explains. "The abortion was apparently kept secret from you."

"What happens to it now?" Cliff blurts out.

The AI hands him a tiny freezer.

"Why did she do this?" he sputters.

"I'm no expert in human emotions, sir," the machine replies. "Thank goodness."

***

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She is born six months later.

Cliff's first act has become a tradition: He places a picture of his daughter and the usual genetic information on the public boards, and then he prepares to ask the world, "What is this child's future?"

But at the last moment, his hand hesitates.

His will fails him.

Or it exceeds what he believed possible, perhaps.

Before the damage is done, he wipes the question off the board. Then he returns to the new crib and peers into his child's eyes. Clearer than opals, they are. Transparent as crystal, and lovely, and when he peers inside them, every future seems real and assured, and lovely, and hers, hers, hers.

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Daniel Abraham made his first appearance in our pages last December with "Pagliacci's Divorce." He returns now with a contemporary fantasy story with a dark streak running through it, dark enough that sensitive readers should be forewarned this story contains adult themes and edgy material.

Mr. Abraham reports that he recently signed a contract to write four books in what will be called the "Long Price" quartet. The first novel, The Sad Trade, *will probably be out towards end of 2005.*

Flat Diane

By Daniel Abraham

HIS HANDS DIDN'T TREMBLE as he traced his daughter. She lay on the kitchen floor, pressing her back against the long, wide, white paper he'd brought, her small movements translated into soft scratching sounds where the cut end tried to curl down into the floor. His pen moved along the horizons of her body — here, where her wrist widened, and then each finger; down her side; rounding the ball of her feet like the passage around the Cape of Good Hope; up to where her wide shorts made it clear this wasn't a work of pornography; then back down the other leg and around. When he came to her spilling hair, he traced its silhouette rather than remain strictly against her skin. He wanted it to look like her, and Diane had thick, curly, gorgeous hair just like her mother had.

"Just almost done, sweetie," he said when she started to shift and fidget. She quieted until the pen tip touched the point where it had started, the circle closed. As he sat back, she jumped up to see. The shape was imperfect — the legs ended in awkward thalidomide bulbs, the hair obscured the long oval face, the lines of the tile were clear where the pen had jumped.

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Still.

"Okay," Ian said. "Now let's just put this on here, and then...."

"I want to write it," Diane said.

Diane was eight, and penmanship was new to her and a thing of pride. Ian reached up to the table, took down a wooden ruler with a sharp metal edge, and drew lines for his daughter to follow. He handed her the pen and she hunched over.

"Okay, sweetie. Write this. Ready?"

She nodded, her hair spilling into her face. She pushed it away impatiently, a gesture of her mother's. Candice, who pushed a lot of things away impatiently.

"Hi," Ian said, slowly, giving his daughter time to follow. "I'm Flat Diane. My real girl, Diane Bursen, sent me out to travel for her. I can't write because I'm only paper. Would you please send her a picture of us, so she can see where I am and what adventures" (Ian stopped here to spell the word out) "I'm having?"

Ian had to draw more lines on the other side of Flat Diane for the mailing address, but Diane waited and then filled that out too, only forgetting the zip code.

Together, they rolled Flat Diane thin and put her in a mailing tube, capped the end with a white plastic lid, and sealed it with tape.

"Can we send Flat Diane to see Mommy?"

He could feel his reaction at the corners of his mouth. Diane's face fell even before he spoke, her lower lip out, her brown eyes hard. Ian stroked her hair.

"We will, sweetheart. Just as soon as she's ready to let us know where we can mail things to her, we will."

Diane jerked away, stomped off to the living room, and turned on the TV, sulking. Ian addressed the package to his mother in Scotland, since it seemed unlikely that either of them would be able to afford a transatlantic vacation anytime soon. When the evening news came on with its roster of rapes and killings, he turned off the set, escorted his protesting daughter through her evening rituals, tucked her into bed, and then went to his room and lay sleepless until after midnight.

The photograph shows his mother, smiling. Her face is broader than

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he remembered it, the hair a uniform gray but not yet white. She holds Flat Diane up, and behind them the half-remembered streets of Glasgow.

There is writing on the back in blue pen and a familiar hand:

> Flat Diane arrived yesterday. I'm taking her to my favorite teahouse this afternoon. It was designed by Charles Rennie Mackintosh — one of the best architects ever to come out of Glasgow, and the scones are lovely. Tomorrow, we are going to work together. My love to Ian and the real Diane.
>
> Mother Bursen

Diane was elated, and Ian was both pleased that the plan was working and saddened to realize how rare his daughter's elation had become. She had insisted that the picture go with her to school, and while she promised that she would care for it, Ian was anxious for it. It was precious, irreplaceable, and therefore fragile.

After work, he went to collect her from her friend Kit's house, anxiety for the picture still in the back of his mind.

"Today," Kit's father Tohiro reported as they drank their ritual cup of coffee, "everything was Scotland. How the people talk in Scotland. How the tea is made in Scotland. Whether you have to share tables at restaurants in Scotland. Diane has become the expert in everything."

"It's my mother. She sent a picture."

"I saw. She told us about the...what? The drawing? Flat Diane? It's a good idea."

"It gives her something to look forward to. And I wanted her to know how many people there are looking out for her. I haven't much family in the States. And with her mother gone...."

A cascade of thumps announced the girls as they came down the stairs. Diane stalked into the kitchen, her brows furrowed, hair curled around her head like a storm cloud. She went to her father, arms extended in demand, and he lifted her familiar weight to his lap.

"I want to go home now," she said. "Kit's a butthead."

Ian grimaced an apology. Tohiro smiled — amused, weary — and sipped his coffee.

"Okay, sweetie. Go get your coat, okay?"

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"I don't want my coat."

"Diane."

His tone was warning enough. She got down and, looking over her shoulder once in anger at the betrayal of insisting on her coat, vanished again. Ian sighed.

"She's just tired," Tohiro said. "Kit's the same way."

They drove home through a rising fog. Though it made Ian nervous, driving when he couldn't quite make out what was coming, Diane only chattered on, stringing together the events of her day with "and after and after and." No matter if no two facts led one to another — they were what she had to say, and he listened half from weariness and half from love.

An accident of timers turned the lights on just as they pulled into the driveway, as if someone were there to greet them. There was nothing in the mailbox from Flat Diane. Or from Candice.

"Daddy?"

Ian snapped to, as if coming awake. Diane held the screen door open, frowning at him impatiently. He couldn't say how long she'd been there, how long he'd fallen into dim reverie.

"Sorry, sweetie," he said, pulling keys from his pocket. "Just got lost in the fog a minute."

Diane turned, looking out at the risen gray. His daughter narrowed her eyes, looking out into nothing.

"I like the fog," she said, delivering the pronouncement with the weight of law. "It smells like Scotland."

And for a moment, it did.

THE PHOTOGRAPH isn't really a photograph but a color printout from an old printer, the ink shinier than the paper it stains. On it, Flat Diane is unfurled between a smiling couple. The man is thick, wide-lipped, graying at the temple. He wears a yellow polo shirt and makes a thumbs-up with the hand that isn't supporting Flat Diane. The woman is smaller, thinner. Her smile is pinched. She only looks like her brother Ian around the eyes and in the tilt of her nose.

Behind them is a simple living room, the light buttery yellow and somehow dirty.

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The bottom of the page carries a message typed as part of the same document:

Dear Ian and Diane,

Flat Diane is here with us in Dallas. She's just in time for Valentine's Day. She's coming out to our special dinner with us tonight at Carmine's Bistro — Italian food. Yum!

Hope everything's good with you. See you soon. Much love.

Aunt Harriet and Uncle Bobby

In two weeks, Diane would be nine. It was a foreign thought. So little time seemed to have passed since her last birthday until he realized that Candice hadn't quite left then. This, now, was his first birthday as both of her parents. He had demanded the day off, and his manager had acquiesced. He had arranged with the school to take her out for the day. A movie, a day with him, and a party that night with all her friends. Kit's parents Anna and Tohiro were helping to drive them all.

He knew he was overcompensating. He hoped it would be enough, and not only for her. There was a loneliness in him that also had to be appeased. Over the course of months, the traces of his wife — still his wife, still only separated — had begun to erode. The last of her special toothpaste used up; the pillows no longer smelling of her hair; the foods that only she ate spoiled and thrown away. In their place were the toys Diane didn't put away, the homework left half-done on the table, the sugared breakfast cereals too sweet for Ian to enjoy except as candy.

But Diane's things were all part his — hers to enjoy, and his to shepherd. Nothing had to be put away unless he said it did, nothing had to be finished unless he insisted, nothing was too sweet, too empty, too bad for you to be dinner except that Ian — big bad unreasonable mean Daddy — said no. Daddy who, after all, couldn't even keep a wife.

It was Friday, and Kit was sleeping over. The girls were in the back — in Diane's room — playing video games. Ian sat on the couch with a beer sweating itself slick in his hand while a news magazine show told of a child drowned in the bathtub by his mother. The place smelled of order-out pizza and the perfume from the beauty salon toys that Kit brought over; costume jewelry spread out on the carpet, glittering and abandoned.

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Ian's thoughts were pleasantly vague — the dim interest in the tragedy playing out on the television, the nagging knowledge that he would have to pretend to make the girls go to sleep soon (they would stay up anyway), the usual pleasure of a week's work ended. Kit's shriek bolted him half across the house before his mind quite understood what the sound had been.

In the bedroom, the tableau. Kit sat inelegantly on the floor, her hand to her cheek, her nose bloody. The controllers for the game box splayed out, black plastic tentacles abandoned on the carpet; the electric music still looping. And Diane, her hand still in a fist, but her eyes wide and horrified.

"What in Christ's name is going on in here?" Ian demanded.

"Sh...she hit me," Kit began, her voice rising as the tears began. "I didn't do anything and she just hit me."

"Diane?"

His daughter blinked and her gaze flickered at her friend, as if looking for support. And then her own eyes filled.

"It was my turn," Diane said, defensively.

"So you hit her?"

"I was mad."

"I'm going *home!*" Kit howled, and bolted for the bathroom. Ian paused for a half second, then scowled and went after the girl, leaving Diane behind. Kit was in the bathroom, trying to stanch the blood with her hand. Ian helped her, sitting her on the toilet with her head tipped back, a wad of tissue pressed to her lip. The bleeding wasn't bad; it stopped quickly. There was no blood on the girl's clothes. When he was sure it wouldn't start again, he wetted a washcloth and wiped Kit's face gently, the blood pinking the terrycloth.

Diane haunted the doorway, her dark eyes profound with confusion and regret.

"I want to go home," Kit said when he had finished. Her small mouth was pressed thin. Ian felt his heart bind. If Diane lost Kit, he'd lose Tohiro and Anna. It was a fleeting thought, and he was ashamed of it the moment it struck him.

"Of course," he said. "I'll take you there. But first I think Diane owes you an apology."

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Diane was weeping openly, the tears gathering on her chin. Kit turned to her, and Ian crossed his arms.

"I didn't mean to," Diane said. "It's just that when people get mad, they hit each other sometimes."

"Diane, what are you thinking? Where did you get an idea like that?"

"Uncle Bobby does, when he's mad. He hits Aunt Harriet all the time."

Ian felt his lips press thin.

"Really. And have you seen him hit her? Diane, have you seen Bobby hit anyone, ever?"

Diane frowned, thinking, trying to remember something. The failure emptied her.

"No."

"Did anyone tell you a story about Bobby hitting Harriet?"

Again the pause, and confusion deep as stone.

"No."

"And?"

Diane stared at him, her mouth half open, her eyes lost.

"I think the words we're looking for are 'I'm sorry,'" Ian said. It was the way his father would have said it.

"I'm sorry, Kitty. I'm sorry. I thought...," and Diane shook her head, held out her hands, palms up in a shrug that broke his heart. "I'm sorry, Kitty. I won't do it again ever, I swear. Don't go home, okay?"

Kit, sullen, scowled at the white and blue tile at her feet.

"Please?" Diane said. He could hear in the softness of her voice how much the word had cost. He paused, hoping that Kit would relent, that she would simply take the blow and accept it, that she would believe that Diane would never do it again.

"'Kay," Kit said. Ian's relief was palpable, and he saw it in Diane. His daughter ran over, grabbed her friend's hand, pulled her out, back to the room. Ian looked in on them. Diane was showering Kit with affection, flattering her shamelessly, letting her play as many times as she cared to. Diane was showing her belly. And it worked. Kit came back from the edge, and they were best friends again.

He put them both to bed, making them promise unconvincingly not to stay up talking, then went through the house, checking that the doors

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and windows were all locked, turning off the lights. He ended in the living room, in the overstuffed chair he'd brought from his home when he and Candice first became lovers. The cushions knew the shape of his back. Sitting under a single lamp that was the only light in the house, he closed his eyes for a moment and drank in silence. The book he was reading — a police procedural set in New Orleans — lay closed on his knee. His body was too tired to rest yet, his mind spun too fast by Diane and his isolation and the endless stretch of working at his desk. When he finally did open his book, the story of grotesque murder and alluring voodoo queens was a relief.

Diane walked in on bare feet just as he was preparing to dog-ear the page, check the girls, and crawl into bed. She crossed the room, walking past the pool of light and receding for a moment into the darkness before coming back to him. In her hand was the scrapbook he'd set aside for Flat Diane. Without speaking, she crawled onto his lap, opened the book with a creak of plastic and cheap glued spine, and took out the page they'd just gotten. His sister, her husband. The meaty hand and sausage-thick thumb. His sister's pinched smile. The filthy light.

"I don't want this one in here," Diane said, handing it to him. Her voice was small, frightened. "I don't like Uncle Bobby."

"Okay, sweetie," he said, taking it from her.

She leaned against him now, her arms pressed into her chest, her knees drawn up. He put his arms around her and rocked gently until they were both near to sleep.

It was the moment, looking back, that he would say he understood what Flat Diane had become.

There are over a dozen photographs in the book now, but this latest addition commands its own page. In it, Candice is sitting at a simple wooden table. Her hair is pulled back in a ponytail that even where it is bound is thick as her forearm. Her eyes slant down at the corners, but her skin is the same tone as Diane's, the oval face clearly the product of the same blood. There is a spider plant hanging above her. The impression is of melancholy and calm and tremendous intimacy. It is not clear who operated the camera.

Flat Diane is in the chair beside her, folded as if she were sitting with

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her mother. A small, cartoon heart has been added to the paper, though it is not clear by whom.

The real Diane has outstripped her shadow — taller, thinner, more awkward about the knees and elbows. This silhouette is already the artifact of a girl who has moved on, but this is not obvious from the picture. In the scrapbook, the only sign of change is a bend on one corner of Flat Diane's wide paper, a design drawn in the white space over the outlined left shoulder, and the lock of white hair across Candice's forehead.

The letter reads:

Diane —

Flat Diane arrived yesterday. I have to tell you she makes me miss you. You can see she's here with me in my apartment.

I love you very much, Diane. I know that it can't seem like it right now, but please believe me when I say it's true. There is no one in the world more important to me than you are. And I hope that, when your father and I have worked out the paths our souls need to take, we can be together again. Whatever happens, I will always be your mother.

It is signed Candice Calvino, her maiden name.

The other letter is not in the scrapbook. It reads:

Ian –

Christ, Ian, I really don't know what to say. I thought that I could just sit down and write this to you rationally, but I am just so goddamn pissed off, I'm not sure that's possible.

This stunt is *exactly* the kind of emotional extortion that made it impossible for me to stay near you. What were you thinking? That you could hold her up, maybe wave her around like a flag, and make me come trotting back — we could just stay together for the children's sake? Our daughter should be more than just the easiest tool for you to get in a dig at me. How could you do this to her?

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If you wanted to make me feel guilty or shamed or selfish, well nice job, Ian. You did.

Never use her like this again. If it isn't beneath you, it goddamn well should be.

C.

The hallway outside the school's administrative offices had white stucco walls, linoleum flooring worn by millions of footsteps from thousands of students, harsh fluorescent lighting. An old clock — white face yellow with age — reported twenty minutes before the noon bell would ring, the press of small bodies filling the halls like spring tadpoles. When Ian walked in, straightening his tie, swallowing his dread, his footsteps echoed.

The secretary smiled professionally when he gave her his name, and led him to a smaller room in the back. The placard on the door — white letters on false wood grain — said that the principal's name was Claude Bruchelli. The secretary knocked once, opened the door, and stepped aside to let Ian pass through a cloud of her cloying perfume and into the office.

The principal rose, stretching out a hand, establishing for Diane that the grownups were together, that they had special rules of respect and courtesy. It was the sort of thing Ian remembered with resentment from when he'd been her age, but he shook the man's hand all the same.

"Thanks for coming, Mr. Bursen. I know it's hard to just leave work like this. But we have a problem."

Diane, sitting on a hard-backed chair, stared at her feet. The way she drummed her heels lightly against the chair legs told him that this was not resentment, but remorse. Ian cleared his throat.

"All right," he said. "What's she done?"

"Mr. Bursen, we have some very strict guidelines from the city about fighting."

"Another fight?"

The principal nodded gravely. It had been at morning recess. Her friend Kit had been adamant that the other girl had started it, but the teacher who had seen it all reported otherwise. No, there had been no injuries beyond a few scratches. This was, however, the third time, which meant a mandatory three-day suspension.

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Diane, stone-faced, seemed to be staring at a banner on the wall that blared WE AIM FOR EXCELLENCE! WE EXPECT THE BEST OF YOU!

"All right," Ian said. "I can get her homework for her and she can do it at home."

The principal nodded, but didn't speak. He looked at Ian from under furrowed brows.

"Mr. Bursen, I have to follow the guidelines. And they're good as far as they go, but Diane's anger problems aren't going to go away. I wish you'd reconsider letting Mrs. Birch...."

"No. I'm sorry, no. I've had a certain amount of counseling myself, one time and another. It doesn't do any good to force a child into it."

"Perhaps Diane would choose to," the principal said, as if she wasn't there, as if her dark, hard eyes weren't fixed on his wall. Ian shrugged.

"Well, what of it, Diane? Care to see Mrs. Birch?" He'd meant to say it gently, but the tone when it left his mouth sounded more of sarcasm. Diane shook her head. Ian met the principal's gaze.

All the way back home, Diane pressed herself against the car door, keeping as far from Ian as she could. He didn't try to speak, not until he knew which words were in him. Instead, he ran through all the people he could think of who might be able or willing to look after Diane for the duration of her exile.

When, that night, he finally spoke, he did it poorly. They were eating dinner — chicken soup and peanut butter sandwiches. He hadn't spoken, she had sulked. Between them the house had been a bent twig, tension ready to snap.

"I can't afford to take three days off work," he said. "They'll fire me."

Diane shrugged, a movement she inherited from him. Her father, who shrugged a lot of feelings away.

"Di, can you at least tell me what this is all about? Fighting at school. It isn't like you, is it?"

"Lisa started it. She called me a nerd."

"And so you hit her?"

Diane nodded and took a bite of her sandwich. Ian felt the blood rushing into his face.

"Jesus Christ, Di. You can't do this! What...I don't know what you're thinking! I am holding on to this house by a thread. I am working every

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day for you, and you are being a little brat! I don't deserve this from you, you know that?"

The bowl sailed across the room, soup arcing out behind it. It shattered where it landed. Diane's bowl. Ian went silent. She stood on her chair, making small grunting noises as she tore the sandwich and squeezed the bread and peanut butter into paste.

"You never listen to me! You always take everyone else's side!"

"Diane...."

"When?" she screamed. "Exactly when in all this do *I* start to matter?"

It was her mother's voice, her mother's tone and vocabulary. Ian's chest ached suddenly, and the thought came unbidden: *What has Candice said in front of that drawing*? Diane turned and bolted from the room.

When the shards of their dinner were disposed of, the salt of soup and sweet of sandwich buried alike in the disposal, Ian went to her. In the dark of her room, Diane was curled on her bed. He sat beside her and stroked her hair.

"I didn't do anything wrong," she said, her voice thick with tears. She didn't mean fighting or throwing soup bowls. She meant that she had done nothing to deserve her mother's absence.

"I know, sweetie. I know you didn't."

"I want to see Mrs. Birch."

He felt his hand falter, forced it to keep touching her, keep reassuring her that he was there, that they were a family, that all would be well.

"If you want, sweetie," he said. "We can do that if you want."

He felt her nod. That night, trying to sleep, he thought of every mean-spirited thing he'd ever said to Diane, of every slight and disappointment and failure that he'd added to her burden. Candice's letter — the private one she'd sent to him — rang in his mind. Diane would be confessing all his sins to someone he'd never met, who would be taking confidences from his daughter that he might never know.

For all the weeks and months that he'd silently prayed for someone to help, someone to shoulder part of the burden of Diane's soul, the granting tasted bitter. His fears were unfounded.

The time came, and Mrs. Birch — a thick woman with a pocked face and gentle voice — became a character in Diane's tales of her days. He

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waited with a sense of dread, but no recriminations came back to him from the school, no letters condemning him as a man and a father. In fact, over the weeks, Diane seemed to become more herself. The routine of fight and reconciliation with Kit, the occasional missive from Flat Diane's latest hosts, the complaints about schoolwork and clothes and how little money he had to spend on her all came almost back to normal. Once, he saw what might have been anger when Diane saw a photograph of her mother. After that he noticed that she had stopped asking when Mommy was coming home. He couldn't have said, if asked, whether the sorrow, the sense of triumph, or the guilt over that sense was the strongest of his reactions.

Everything was fine until the night in February when she woke up screaming and didn't stop.

THE PICTURE is cheap — the color balance is off, giving the man's face an unnatural yellow tint. He is in his later twenties, perhaps his early thirties, the presentiment of jowls already plucking the flesh of his jaws. His hair is short and pale. His eyes are blue.

In the picture, Flat Diane has been taped around a wide pillar, her arms and legs bending back out of sight. A long black cloth wraps across where the eyes might be, had Ian drawn them in; a blindfold.

The man who Ian doesn't know, has never met, is caressing a drawn-in breast. His tongue protrudes from his viciously grinning mouth, its tip flickering distance from the silhouette's thigh. He looks not like Satan, but like someone who wishes that he were, someone trying very hard to be.

The writing on the back of the photograph is block letters, written in blue felt-tip.

It reads: FLAT DIANE HAS GONE ASTRAY.

A new photograph comes every week. Some might be amusing to another person; most make him want to retch.

The best trick Hell has to play against its inmates is to whisper to them that this — this now — is the bottom. Nothing can be worse than this. And then to pull the floor away.

"I'm sorry," Ian said, refusing to understand. "I didn't catch that."

Mrs. Birch leaned back, her wide, pitted face tired and impassive. She

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laced her hands on her desk. The hiss of the heating system was the only sound while she brought herself to break the news again. This time, she took a less direct approach.

"Diane has always had an anger problem. There's no good time to lose your mother, but this stage of development is particularly bad. And I think that accounts for a lot of her long-term behaviors. The fighting, the acting out in class, but these *new* issues...."

"Child Protective Services?" Ian said, able at last to repeat the counselor's statement and plumb the next depth of hell. "You called Child Protective Services?"

"The kind of sudden change we've seen in her — the nightmares, the anxiety attacks.... She's in fifth grade, Mr. Bursen. No kid in fifth grade should be having anxiety attacks. When she went to the doctor, you and he and two nurses together couldn't get her to undress, and you say she never had a problem with it before. That kind of sudden change means trauma. Nothing *does* that but trauma."

Ian closed his eyes, the heel of his palm pressed to his brow, rubbing deeply. His body shook, but it seemed unconnected to his terrible clarity of mind, as if the tremors were something being done to him.

"The Buspar seems to be helping," he said. An idiot change of subject, and not at all to the point, but Mrs. Birch shifted in her chair and went there with him.

"There are a lot of anti-anxiety drugs," she agreed. "Some of them may help. But only with the symptoms, not the problem. And the trauma, whatever it is...it may be something ongoing."

"Christ."

"She's graduating in a few weeks here. Next year's middle school, and I won't be able to see her anymore. With CPS, you'll have a caseworker, someone who isn't going to change every time she switches schools. And who knows? Maybe the investigation will help. I'm sorry. About all of this. I really am. But it's the right thing."

Now it was Ian's turn to go silent, to gather himself. Speaking the words was like standing at the edge of a cliff.

"You think I'm fucking my kid."

"No," Mrs. Birch said, in the voice of a woman for whom this territory was not new. "But I think somebody is."

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Diane waited for him in the outer office, looking smaller than she was, folded in on herself. He forced himself to look at her as she was, and not as he wanted her to be. She forced a smile and raised a hand, sarcastic and sad. Ian knelt at her feet and took her hand, but Diane would not meet his gaze. Mrs. Birch was a presence he felt behind him, but didn't see.

"Sweetie," he said.

Diane didn't look up. He reached out to stroke her hair, but hesitated, pulled back. It was that fear that touching his child would be interpreted as sex that brought home how much they had lost.

"It's going to be okay, sweetie," he said, and Diane nodded, though she didn't believe it. When he stood, she scooped up her book bag and went out with him. In the hallway, with Mrs. Birch still haunting the door to the office, Diane reached up and put her hand in his. It was a thin victory, hardly any comfort at all.

The clouds were close, smelling of rain. He drove home slowly, the sense of disconnection, of unreality, growing as the familiar streets passed by. Diane sat alert but silent until they were almost home.

"Are they going to make me live with Mom?"

A pang of fear so sharp it was hard to differentiate from nausea struck him, but he kept his voice calm. He couldn't let her think they might lose each other.

"Make you? No, sweet. There's going to be someone from the state who's going to want to talk to you, but that's all."

"Okay."

"They're going to ask you questions," he continued, the words leaking from him like air from a pricked balloon. "You just need to tell them the truth. Even if you get embarrassed or someone told you that you shouldn't tell them something, you should tell them the truth."

"Okay."

He pulled into the driveway, their house — Christ, the mortgage payment was a week late already; he had to remember to mail the check tomorrow — looming in the twilight. The lawn was the spare, pale green of spring.

"You should tell me the truth too," he said, amazed by how sane he sounded, how reasonable. "Sweetie? Is there anyone who's doing things to you? Things you don't like?"

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"Like am I getting molested?"

Amazing too how old she had become. He killed the engine. There had to be some way to ask gently, some approach to this where he could still treat her like a child, still protect her innocence. He didn't know it, couldn't find it. The rich scent of spring was an insult.

"Are you?" he asked.

Diane's eyes focused on the middle distance, her face a mask of concentration. Slowly, she shook her head, but her hands plucked at the seat, popping the cloth upholstery in wordless distress.

"If something were happening, Di, you could tell me. There wouldn't be anything to be afraid of."

"It's not so bad during the day," she said. "It's at night. It's like I know things...there's things I know and things I can almost remember. But they didn't happen."

"You're sure they didn't?"

A hesitation, but a nod — firm and certain.

"The doctor's going to want to examine you," he said.

"I don't want him to."

"Would it be better with a different doctor?"

"No."

"What if it was a woman? Would that make it easier?"

Diane frowned out the window of the car.

"Maybe," she said softly. Then, "I don't want to be crazy."

"You're not, sweet. You're not crazy. No more than I am."

They ate dinner together, talking about other things, laughing even. A thin varnish of normalcy that Ian felt his daughter clinging to as desperately as he was. Afterward, Kit called, and Diane retreated to gossip in privacy while Ian cleaned the dishes. He read her to sleep, watching her chest from the corner of his eye until her breath was steady and deep and calm. He left a night-light glowing, a habit she'd returned to recently.

He sat in the kitchen and slowly, his hands shaking, laid out the pictures of Flat Diane — the ones recently arrived, the ones he hadn't shown her. He shuffled them, rearranged them, spread them out like tarot.

It had been stupid, sending out their real address. Ian saw that now, and twisted the thought to better feel the pain of it. What if this mad fucker

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had tracked down Diane because Ian had as good as sent out directions to her...?

But no, he didn't believe that. Or that Tohiro or one of her teachers or some evil pizza delivery man had targeted her. The photographs were too much a coincidence, the timing too precise.

He recalled vividly his art history teacher back at university, back at home in Scotland. The old man had told each of them to bring in a picture of a person they loved — mother, father, brother, lover, pet. And then, he'd told them to gouge out the eyes. The shocked silence was the first moment of his lecture on the power of image, the power of art. These were dumb bits of paper, but each of them that touched pen-tip to a beloved eye knew — did not believe, but *knew* — that the pictures were connected with the people they represented.

Ian had sent his daughter's soul voyaging. He hadn't even considered the risks. It was worse than sending only their address; he might as well have delivered her, trussed and helpless. And now....

And now Flat Diane had gone astray.

With a boning knife, he cut out the blond man's blue eyes, but he felt the effort's emptiness. Nothing so poetic for him. Instead, he took the envelopes to his study, turned on his computer, and scanned in the bastard's face. When it was saved, he dropped it into e-mail and then got on the phone.

"Hello?" Candice said from a thousand miles away. Her voice was uncertain — wondering, he supposed, who would be calling her so late at night.

"It's Ian. Check your e-mail."

The pause would have been strained if he'd cared more. If this had still been about the two of them and what they had and lost and why. Only it wasn't, and the hesitation at the far end of the line only made him impatient.

"Ian, what's this about?"

"Flat Diane, actually. I've had a letter for her. Several. I need to know who the man is in the pictures."

Another pause, but this one different. Ian could hear it in the way she breathed. Intimacy can lead to this, he supposed. Teach you how to read a woman by her breath on the far end of a phone line.

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"You already know," he said. "Don't you."

"My computer's in another room. I can call you back."

"I'll wait," he said.

She was back within five minutes, the hard plastic fumbling as she picked the handset back up, giving way to her voice.

"I'm sorry, Ian," she said. "This is my fault. His name is Stan Lecky. He...he was a neighbor of mine when I came out here. A friend."

"A lover?"

"No, Ian. Just a friend. But...he started saying things that made me.... We had a falling out. I got a restraining order. He moved away eight or nine months ago."

"He was the one who took the picture of you, wasn't he? The picture of you and Flat Diane."

"Yes."

Ian considered the envelope that had contained the latest atrocity. The postmark was from Seattle. Stan Lecky in Seattle. And a photo of him, no less. Certainly it couldn't be so hard with all that to find an address.

"She hasn't seen that, has she?" Candice asked. He didn't know how best to answer.

Ian slept in on Saturday, pretending that the dead black sleep and the hung-over exhaustion of his body were related somehow to luxury. It had been years since he'd been able to sleep past six A.M. He had Diane to feed and dress and shuffle off to school. He had his commute. His body learned its rhythms, and then it held to them. But Saturday, Ian rose at ten.

Diane was already on the couch, a bowl of cereal in her lap, her eyes clouded. Her skin seemed paler, framed by the darkness of her hair. Bags under her eyes like bruises. Ian recalled Victorian death pictures — photographs of the dead kept as mementos, or perhaps to hold a bit of the soul that had fled. He made himself toast and tea, and sat beside his daughter.

On the TV, girls three or four years older than Diane were talking animatedly about their boyfriends. They wore tight jeans and midriff tops, and no one thought it odd. No one wondered whether this was the path of wisdom. He found himself wondering what Diane made of it, but didn't ask. There were more pressing issues.

"How'd you sleep?" he asked.

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"Okay."

"More nightmares?"

She shrugged, her gaze fixed on the screen. Ian nodded, accepting the tacit *yes*. He finished his toast, washed down the last of his tea, smacked his lips.

"I have to go out for a little while. Errands."

"Want me to come too?"

"No, you stay here. I won't be long."

Diane looked away and down. It made his heart ache to see it. Part of that was knowing that he'd once again failed to protect her from some pain, and part a presentiment of the longer absence she would have to endure. He leaned over and kissed the crown of her head where the bones hadn't been closed the first time he'd held her.

"I'll be right back, kiddo," he murmured, and she smiled wanly, accepting his half-apology. And yet, by the time he had his keys, she was lost again in the television, gone into her own world as if he had never been there.

Tohiro was sitting in his driveway, a lawnmower partially disassembled before him. He nodded as Ian came up the path, but neither rose nor turned back to his work. Ian squatted beside him.

"I don't know why I think I can do this," Tohiro said. "Every time I start, it's like I don't remember how poorly it went the time before. And by the time it comes back to me, it's too late, the thing's already in pieces."

"Hard. I do the same thing myself."

Tohiro nodded.

"I need a favor," Ian said. "I have to go away for a bit. Diane's mother and I...there are some things we need to discuss. I might be away for week, perhaps. Perhaps less. I was wondering if...."

It choked him. Asking for help had never been a strong suit, nor lying. The two together were almost more than he could manage. Tohiro frowned and leaned forward, picking up a small, grease-covered bit of machinery and dropping it thoughtfully into a can of gasoline.

"Are you sure that's wise?" Tohiro asked. "The timing might look...."

He knew then. Diane had told Kit, and Kit her parents; nothing could be more natural.

"I don't have the option," Ian said.

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"This is about what's happening to Diane?"

"Yes."

Ian's knees were starting to ache a bit, but he didn't move, nor did Tohiro. The moment stretched, then:

"It might be better if Kit invited her," Tohiro said. "If it were a treat — a week-long slumber party — it could mask the sting."

"Do you think she would?"

"For Diane? Kit would learn to fly if Diane asked her. Girls."

"I'd appreciate it. More than I can say."

"You are putting a certain faith in me."

Tohiro met his gaze, expression almost challenging.

"It isn't you," Ian said, softly. "I'm fairly sure I know who it is."

"I see."

Ian shrugged, aware as he did so that it was a mirror of his daughter's, and that Tohiro would understand its eloquence as Ian had understood Diane's.

"I'll let you know when it's going to happen," Ian said. "I can't go before the CPS home visit, but it won't be long after that. And if you ever need the same of me, only say so."

The man shifted under Ian's words, uneased. Dark eyes looked up at him and then away. Tohiro stuck fingers into the gasoline, pulling out the shining metal that the fuel had cleaned.

"That brings up something. Ian.... Anna and I would rather not have Kit stay over with Diane. I know it isn't you, that you wouldn't...but the stakes are high, and I can't afford being wrong."

Ian rocked back. A too-wide rictus grin forced its way onto his face — he could feel the skin pulling.

"I'm sorry, Ian, it's just...."

"It's the right thing," he forced out, ignoring the anger and shock, pushing it down. "If I thought for a minute that it was you...or even if I only weren't certain, then...."

Ian opened his hands, fingers spread; the gesture a suggestion of open possibility, a euphemism for violence. It was something they both understood. Men protected their children. Men like the two of them, at least.

Ian pulled himself up, his knees creaking. Kit, in the window, caught

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sight of him and waved. She was lighter than Diane, but not as pretty, Ian thought.

"I'll call later," Ian said.

"Do. I'll talk with Kit. We'll arrange things. But Ian? Diane needs you."

"I know she does. I don't want to leave her. Especially now, I just...."

"I didn't mean don't go," Tohiro said. "I meant don't get caught."

The home visit was less than he expected. Two women in casual businesswear appeared at the appointed hour. One took Diane away, the other asked him profoundly personal questions — Why had his wife left him? Had he been in therapy? Did he have a police record? Could he describe his relationship with his daughter? Only the last of these pushed him to tears. The woman was sympathetic, but unmoved, a citizen of a nation of tears from innocent and guilty alike.

She arranged a time and place for Diane to see a doctor — a woman doctor and Ian hadn't even had to ask. He promised that Diane would be there, and she explained the legal ramifications if she were not. The other woman appeared with Diane at her side. Diane's face was gray with exhaustion. Ian shook their hands, thanked them explicitly for coming, implicitly for not taking his child from him.

When they had gone, Diane went out to the back steps, looking out over a yard gone to seed — long grass and weeds. Her head rested in her hands. Ian sat beside her.

"Not so bad, was it?" he asked.

"She asked me a lot of questions," Diane said. "I don't know if I answered them all right."

"Did you tell her the truth?"

"I think so."

"Only think?"

Diane's brow furrowed as she looked at the horizon. Her shoulders hunched forward.

"She asks if things happened. And sometimes I think they did, but then I can't remember. After a while I start getting scared."

"It's like you're living a life you don't know about," Ian said, and she nodded. He put an arm around her shoulders, and she leaned in to him, trembling and starting to cry. Her sobs wracked her thin body like vomiting. Ian, holding her, wept.

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"I'm not okay, Daddy," she wailed to his breast. "I'm not okay. I'm not okay."

"You will be, sweetie. You will."

THE PICTURE is cropped. In the original, things had been happening as unnatural to paper as they would be to a child. In this version, only the man's chest above the nipples, his shoulders, his face, his smug expression. These are all the details that matter. In this photograph, he could be anyone, doing anything. It is a head shot, something to put down on a bar or store counter, the sort of photograph that seems to fit perfectly with the phrase "I'm looking for someone; maybe you've seen him."

The original photo has obscenities and suggestions written on it. There is no writing on this copy, no note to accompany it. Nothing that will tie it back to Ian, should the police find it and not him.

He had driven to Seattle — a two-day trip — in a day and a half. Flying would have been faster, but he'd taken his pistol out of storage. Driving with a handgun was easy; flying impossible or, if not impossible, not worth doing.

He arrived in the city late at night and called Diane from a payphone using a card he'd bought with cash. She was fine. School was boring. Kit was a butthead. Her voice was almost normal — if he knew her less, he might have mistaken it. He was her father, though, and he knew what she sounded like when things were okay and when she only wanted them to be. They didn't talk about the nightmares. He told her he loved her, and she evaded, embarrassed. With the handset back in its cradle, the gun in his jacket pocket pulling the fabric down like a hand on his shoulder, Ian stood in the rain, the cool near-mist soaking him. In time, he gathered himself together enough to find a hotel and a bed to lie in while his flesh hummed from exhaustion and the road.

Finding Lecky took all the next day and part of the night, but he did it. The morning sun gave the lie to the city's gray reputation — clouds of perfect white stretched, thinned, vanished, re-formed against a perfect blue sky. Nature ignoring Ian's desperation. The kids spare changing on the street corners avoided his gaze.

It was early, the morning rush hour still a half hour from starting. Ian

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didn't want the beast to go off to work, didn't want to spend a day waiting for the confrontation. He wanted it over now.

The house was in a bad part of town, but the lawn was trim, the windows clean. Moss stained the concrete walk, and the morning paper lay on the step, wrapped in dewy plastic. Ian picked it up, shaking the drops from it, and then rang the doorbell. His breath was shaking. The door opened and the beast appeared, a cup of coffee in one hand.

There was no glimmer of recognition, no particular sense of confusion or unease. Here, Ian thought, was a man with a clear conscience. A man who had done no wrong.

"I need to talk to you," Ian said, handing the man his newspaper.

"I'm sorry. Do I know you?"

"No. But we have business in common. We have people in common, I think. May I come in?"

The man frowned at Ian and put down the paper.

"I'm sorry," the beast said, smiling as he stepped back, preparing to close the door. "I have to get to work here, and really I don't want whatever you're selling. Thanks, though."

"I've come for Flat Diane."

The man's expression shifted — surprise, chagrin, anger, all in the course of a single breath. Ian clamped his hand on the butt of his pistol, his finger resting against the trigger.

"Don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about," Ian said. "I have the pictures."

The beast shook his head, defensive and dismissive at the same time.

"Okay," the man said. "Okay, look, so it was a bad joke. All right. I mean, it's not like anyone got hurt, right?"

"What do you know about it?"

Something in Ian's voice caught his attention. Pale blue eyes fixed on him, the first hint of fear behind them. Ian didn't soften. His heart was tripping over as if he'd been running, but his head felt very calm.

"No one got hurt," the man said. "It's just paper. So maybe it was a little crude. It was just a joke, right? You're, like, Diane's dad? Look, I'm sorry if that was a little upsetting, but...."

"I saw what you did to her."

"To who?" The eyes were showing their fear, their confusion.

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"My daughter."

"I never *touched* your daughter."

"No?"

It was a joy, stripping his certainty away, seeing the smug, leering face confused and frightened. Ian leaned in.

"Tell you what. Give me Flat Diane," he said, "and I might let you live."

The panic in the pale eyes was joyous, but even in his victory, Ian felt the hint that it was too much; he'd gone too far.

"Sure," the beast said, nodding. "No, really, sure. Come on, I'll...."

And he tried to slam the door. Ian had known it was coming, was ready for it. His foot blocked the closing door and he pulled the gun from his pocket. The beast jumped back, lost his balance, toppled. The coffee fanned out behind him and splashed on the hardwood floor as Ian kicked the door closed behind him.

The beast was blinking, confused. His hands were raised, not in surrender, but protection, as if his fingers might deflect a bullet. A radio was playing — morning show chatter. Ian smelled bacon grease on the air.

"Please," the beast said. "Look, it's going to be okay, guy. Just no guns. All right? No guns."

"Where is she?"

"Who?"

"Flat Diane!" Ian yelled, pleased to see the beast flinch.

"It's not here anymore. Seriously. Seriously, it's gone. Joke over. Honestly."

"I don't believe you."

"Look, it's a long story. There were some things that happened and it just made sense to get rid of it, you know? Let it go. It was only supposed to be a joke. You know Candice...."

Ian shook his head. He felt strange; his mind was thick as cotton and yet perfectly lucid.

"I'm not leaving without her," he said.

"It's not *here!*" the beast shouted, his face flushed red. He rolled over, suddenly facing the back of the house. Running. With a feeling like reaching out to tap the fleeing man's shoulder, Ian raised the gun and fired. The back of the beast's head bloomed like a rose, and he fell.

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Oh Jesus, Ian thought. And then, a moment later, *I couldn't have made that shot if I'd tried.*

He walked forward, pistol trained on the unmoving shape, but there was no need. The beast was dead. He'd killed him. Ian stood silently, watching the pool of blood seep across the floor. There was less than he'd thought. The morning show announcers laughed at something. Outside, a semi drove by, rattling the windows. Ian put the gun in his pocket, ignoring the heat.

He hadn't touched anything, not with his hands. There were no fingerprints. But he didn't have Flat Diane. He had to search the place. He had to hurry. Perhaps the beast kept plastic gloves. The kind you use for housework.

He searched the bedroom, the bath. The kitchen where half an egg was growing cold and solid on its plate. And then the room in the back. The room from the pictures. He went through everything — the stacks of pornography, the camera equipment. He didn't look away, no matter how vile the things he found. Rape porn. Children being used. Other things. Worse. But not his daughter.

He sat on the edge of the bathtub, head in his hands, when the voice came. The house was a shambles. Flat Diane wasn't there, or if she was, she was too well hidden. He didn't know what to do. The doorbell chimed innocently and a faint voice came.

"Stan?" it said. A woman's voice. "Stan, are you in there? It's Margie."

Ian stood and walked. He didn't run. He stepped over the corpse, calmly out the back door, stuffing the rubber gloves into his pockets as he went. There was an alleyway, and he opened the gate and stepped out into it. He didn't run. If he ran, they'd know he was running from something. And Diane needed him, didn't she. Needed him not to get caught.

Ian didn't stop to retrieve his things from the hotel; he walked to his car, slipped behind the wheel, drove. Twenty minutes east of Klamath Falls, he pulled to the side, walked to a tree, and leaning against it, vomited until he wept.

"I didn't mean to," he said through his horror. "Christ, I didn't mean to."

He hadn't called Diane from his room. He hadn't given anyone his name. He'd even found a hotel that took cash. Of course he'd fucking meant to.

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"I didn't mean to," he said.

He slept that night at a rest stop, bent uncomfortably across the back seat. In his dreams, he saw the moment again and again; felt the pistol jump; heard the body strike wood. The pistol jumped; the body struck the floor. The pale head, round as an egg, cracked open. The man fled, heels kicking back behind him; the pistol jumped.

Morning was sick. A pale sun in an empty sky. Ian stretched out the vicious kinks in his back, washed his face in the restroom sink, and drove until nightfall.

He hadn't found Flat Diane, but he couldn't go back for her — not now. Maybe later, when things cooled down. But by then she could have been thrown away or burned or cut to pieces. And he couldn't guess what might happen to Diane when her shadow was destroyed — freedom or death or something entirely else. He didn't want to think about it. The worst was over, though. The worst had to be over, or else he didn't think he could keep breathing.

Tohiro and Anna's house glowed in the twilight, windows bright and cheerful and warm and normal. He watched them from the street, his back knotted from driving, the car ticking as it cooled. Tohiro passed by the picture window, his expression calm, distant and slightly amused. Anna was in the kitchen, the back of her head moving as her hands worked at something; washing, cutting, wringing — there was no way to tell. Somewhere in there, Kit and Diane played the games they always did. The pistol jumped; the body fell. Ian started the car, steadied his hands on the wheel, then killed the engine and got out.

Tohiro's eyebrows rose a fraction and a half-smile graced his mouth when he opened the door.

"Welcome back," Tohiro said, stepping back to let him in. "We weren't expecting you until tomorrow. Things went better than you thought?"

"Things went faster."

Curiosity plucked at the corners of Tohiro's eyes. Ian gazed into the house, willing away the questions that begged to be asked. Tohiro closed the door.

"You look...," he began.

Ian waited. *Like shit*. Or maybe *pounded*. The silence stretched and

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he glanced over. Tohiro's face was a soft melancholy. Ian nodded, barely moving, half asking him to finish, half daring him.

"You look older."

"Yeah, well. You know. Time."

A shriek and the drumming of bare feet and Diane had leapt into his arms. His spine protested the weight. Ian held her carefully, like something precious. Then, as if she'd suddenly remembered that they weren't alone, she drew back, tried to make it all seem casual.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey. You been good?"

Diane shrugged — an *I guess* gesture.

"We were just about to have supper," Tohiro said. "If you'd like to join us?"

Ian looked at Diane. Her face was impassive, blank, but at the edges there were the touches invisible to anyone else, anyone who didn't know her as he did.

"I think I'd rather just roll on home," Ian said. "That good by you, sweetie?"

"Sure," she said, upbeat enough that he knew it had been her fondest wish. He let her ride him to the car, piggyback.

That night, they both suffered nightmares. It struck Ian, as he calmed Diane from hers and waited for his own to fade, that there would be more nights like this; screams from her or from him, then warm milk and nightlights and empty talk that gave the evil some time to fade. That if they were *lucky* there would be many more. Nothing more would happen to Flat Diane; justice would not come to call for him. It was the best he could hope for.

"It's okay," he whispered to her as she began to drowse. Curled into her blanket, her breath came deeper, more regular. "It's over. It's over, sweetie. It's all right."

He didn't add that just being over didn't mean it hadn't changed everything forever, or that some things don't stop just because they've ended. Or that a girl set voyaging takes her own chances, and no father's love — however profound — can ever call her back. Those weren't the sorts of things you said when all you had to offer your child were comfort and hope. ☙

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While this issue doesn't include any space opera stories, it does have a good spectrum of sf and fantasy stories, ranging from the futuristic to the prehistoric. Here's a light tale of high fantasy from one of the genre's preeminent practitioners. Speaking of light fantasy, now's a good time to mention oh-so-subtly that a collection of heroic and high fantasy stories from F&SF, *entitled* In Lands That Never Were, *is due to hit the bookstores around the time this issue comes off the presses.*

The Courtship of Kate O'Farrissey

By John Morressy

THE WIZARD CONHOON was not famed for his softness of heart. Indeed, he was well known as a man who derived a deep satisfaction from placing a curse on anyone who deserved it and was always amenable to cursing those who, at the moment, did not, on the certainty that before long, they would.

Neither was Conhoon ever considered a companionable man. Early in his life, for reasons he did not choose to disclose and may well have forgotten completely, he had concluded that people, one and all, were no good. Male and female, young and old, wife or kids or kin, friend or neighbor, people eventually made life hell. Men shouted; women complained; children screamed. Experience taught him that men also complained, women also shouted, and children both shouted and complained in addition to their screaming, and had other nasty ways as well. Animals were out of the question; trolls were not found in his native land; spirits were full of tricks. And so for a century and more, Conhoon had dwelt alone in untidy bachelorhood. But now, for seven full years, someone had

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shared his cottage, and though he would have died a cruel death before admitting it, her presence had brought about a distinct improvement in his world.

Kathleen O'Farrissey was the daughter of an old acquaintance, a charming worthless fellow who had gone off to live among the Good People and left her to shift for herself. A young lady considerably gifted in the magical line, by mutual compact she became Conhoon's ward and his apprentice. She was also his cook, skivvy, laundress, housekeeper, barber, gardener, carpenter, and maid of all work.

After seven years, it would have been hard to say which of them had reaped the greater benefit from the arrangement. Kate was growing into a lovely young lady (the O'Farrisseys had always been a comely stock). Her long hair was as red as an autumn sunset, her eyes a deep blue, her hands and feet small and delicate, her figure trim and slender. More often than not, the beautiful blue eyes were red-rimmed and puffy from long hours spent reading by flickering rushlight in the books of magical lore assigned her by Conhoon, and the pale and dainty hands were red and raw from the scrubbing and washing and wringing, and the grubbing in the garden; but Kate seldom complained. She had worked harder in her father's house, and gotten less for it. Here, she was learning a deal of handy magic and eating regularly and well of her own excellent cooking. And while Conhoon was quick to disparage, slow to give thanks, and constitutionally incapable of speaking a word of praise, he never raised a hand to her. The O'Farrissey had thumped her like a kettledrum. Thanks to her increasing skill in the subtle arts, no one would ever do *that* again.

The benefits to Conhoon were more evident. Good food had filled out his gaunt and bony frame. The garments that had once hung about him now fit snugly. He had taken to patting his stomach comfortably after meals; there was noticeably more of it to pat than there had ever been before. His beard was fluffy and neatly trimmed; he could now run his fingers through it without fear of getting them caught. His clothing was clean and soft from frequent washing. And despite the startling odors, unnerving stains, and general messiness inevitable in a wizard's dwelling, the little house was a tidy place. Kate saw to that. She was a treasure.

The problem was the young men.

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Conhoon noticed the first one on a glorious morning in early spring, when he looked out on his front garden — once an expanse of muck, his dooryard had been made into a useful and attractive herb garden by Kate — and saw a great lump of a lad making cow's eyes at the girl as she planted horse mint. The sight of an intruder drew a low ominous growl from the wizard. He prepared to shout a terrifying warning, but even as he chose his words, he saw Kate pitch a clod at the boy's head, sending him off like a startled deer. Conhoon smiled with satisfaction. The child was learning well.

A week later, there were two lads gawking at her. She shied a clod at each. Her aim was excellent. But three days later one of them was back, and two days after that, the other.

As the weather warmed, so did the young lads. More and more of them could be seen under the trees, or peering from behind a bush, or sighing by the wall. Even rain did not deter them. To judge from the crowds underfoot by early summer, one might have thought a fair was being held in the woods around Conhoon's house.

He endured the intruders in silence until well after Midsummer Night, telling himself that they were not worth cursing, and besides, it would do the girl good to deal with her own problems and not expect him to solve them for her. But once the serenading began, his patience was at an end. He sat down to his porridge next morning with the look of an executioner in his eyes.

"Did you hear them? Did you hear the singing?" he demanded.

"I did," she said, pouring milk over her porridge.

"That's the end of it. I'll stand for no more. Trampling my garden, disturbing the cow, confusing the pigs...there'll be no more of it. If it's singing they want, I'll give them singing. I'll turn the lot of them into sparrows."

"Ah, now, it's only a lot of silly boys they are, and nothing for a wizard to bother with. Sure, if I stamp my foot, they run and hide."

Gulping down a spoonful of porridge, Conhoon said, "Stamp your foot, then, or they'll all be sparrows."

"And wouldn't that be a fine waste of magic? The sparrows would be a bigger nuisance than the boys. Leave them to me."

Conhoon grunted and resumed eating. He consumed several mouthfuls

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of porridge in silence, then he asked, "Where do they come from? There's no farm within a day's good walking."

"Oh, they're from here and there. One place and another. The young men will travel a long way to see a great beauty."

Conhoon paused, spoon in midair. "What's this? What are you talking about? What great beauty?"

"It's myself I'm talking about."

"You're no great beauty, you're my apprentice!"

Kate brushed back a lock of hair and swept the wizard up and down with a look of icy hauteur. "So you say. There's others that say I'm the grandest, loveliest lady in all of Ireland. If you listened to what the lads sang, instead of shutting yourself up with your book of curses — "

Conhoon stood bolt upright. "It's a child you are! You're no grand lady, you're O'Farrissey's kid!" he cried, waving his spoon about and sending bits of porridge here and there.

"True enough, I am of the O'Farrisseys. My grandfather married the fairest woman in all Meath, my mother was known as 'The Dark Rose of Ballybunion,' and my father remarried to a princess of The People Outside Us," said Kate, rising and drawing herself up. "I will thank you not to forget that, and not to fling your porridge around the room."

"You're my apprentice, and I'll have no talk of marriage in this house, or of grand and lovely ladies, and I'll have no more soft-headed layabouts in my garden moaning and moping and filling your head with foolishness. Time enough to think of marrying when you've learned to spell!" Conhoon concluded with a flourish of his spoon.

Kate folded her arms. She gave a little sniff of laughter. "You great fraud. You're afraid of losing your skivvy."

"I am not!"

"You've no liking anymore for bad food and dirt and raggedy clothes all full of stains and a beard like the sweepings of a chicken coop hanging from your chin. Spoiled is what you are, you lazy old lump."

"Will you listen to the ingratitude!" Conhoon lamented, flinging up his hands, speckling the ceiling with bits of porridge. "A poor abandoned child that I saved from starvation, and she turns on me the minute some booby throws a sweet word at her. When I was an apprentice there was respect for wizards, and not even a pooka would speak such words as have

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just been spoken in this house, but the apprentices these days...." He trailed off into a low sullen growl.

"When you were an apprentice, you were not made to be cook and baker and washerwoman and clod-breaker and stonemason and thatcher and woodcutter and beard-trimmer and carpenter and milkmaid and pig-swiller and a dozen other hard dirty jobs at once, and then spend hours reading tiny print in near darkness," she said, shaking her fist at him.

"I was not. And aren't you always telling me I'm the worse for it? Here I'm giving you all the advantages I never had, and you're no more grateful than a cat."

Kate thrust out her jaw and fumed in silence for a moment. She hated to have her own words quoted against her, because it left her with no telling comeback. All she could manage was "Fraud!"

"Is it fraud to teach you all the things you need to know to make your way in this world and any other you may find yourself in? There's many would fall on their knees to thank me for such fraud. Ah, the O'Farrisseys were always an ungrateful lot," said Conhoon, shaking his head sadly and heaving a great martyred sigh.

Kate took a bit of time to calm herself. She folded her arms once more, and in an even voice said, "I've learned how to save a household from ruin, and I've learned a few handy spells. The knowledge will serve me well, and grateful I am for it, if that's what you want to hear. And my husband will be grateful, too." She seated herself and took a spoonful of porridge.

Conhoon made a series of inarticulate strangled noises before finally roaring, "Husband?! What husband are you talking about, you silly chit of a girl?!"

Kate swallowed her porridge, put down her spoon, and with great composure said, "It's a grown woman I am, and there's many paying court to me, and many more who will. And when I find one that suits me, I'll marry him, and you can cook your own porridge and fling it where you like and clean it off the walls yourself."

Before Conhoon could find words adequate to articulate his outrage, a glow in the air by the kitchen door caught his and Kate's attention. It increased in size and brightness, and when it was the size of a kettle and pale gold in hue, Conhoon turned to Kate and demanded, "When did you learn this?"

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She gave a start at his words. She had been staring open-mouthed at the apparition. In a subdued and mystified voice, she said, "It is no work of mine."

"I have had enough," said Conhoon, fixing his eye on the glow. He laid his spoon carefully beside his bowl and pushed up his sleeves. "I have tolerated clumsy bosthoons trampling my grounds, and lovesick serenades I have allowed without interruption. But enchanted intrusions into my home is beyond my patience. Stand back, girl, the way you'll be out of reach of the horrifying things I am about to do to this tricky meddler the minute he shows his face."

He stood by the table, flexing his fingers in anticipation. Kate slipped behind him, and standing on tiptoe, peeked over his shoulder. The luminous visitation was now just about human size, and the light began to undergo subtle shifts and shadings. A form became visible, and then features. No lovesick swain appeared. To Conhoon and Kate's amazement, when the glow winked out, abruptly as a snuffed candle, a woman in her middle years, wearing a pale pink dress and a tiara and holding aloft a slender wand, smiling in a sweet and reassuring manner, stood in the kitchen doorway. The tips of iridescent wings gleamed above her shoulders.

"Who are you?" cried Kate, and simultaneously Conhoon roared, "What do you want?"

Craning forward and shielding her eyes with one hand, a precaution totally unnecessary withindoors and one which struck the wizard as mere affectation, the woman looked around the kitchen. Her inspection completed, she turned to Conhoon with an expression of concern and asked, "Have I come to the right place?"

"No," he snapped.

"Oh, how terribly awkward. Isn't this the residence of...." She rummaged in a pocket and drew out a small white book, which she held at arm's length. Leafing through, she paused at a page, squinted, nodded, and with a cheerful smile, concluded, "Miss Kathleen O'Farrissey, aged seventeen, nearly eighteen?"

"And what would you be wanting with me?" Kate asked, stepping boldly out from behind Conhoon. Hands on hips, she gave the woman in pink a straight look and said, "If there's any ideas in your head about whisking me off to marry your sorry-looking son, or bedazzling me with

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a love charm, or any of that, then you'd do well to light yourself up again and be on your way before my Uncle Con sends you off with something worse than a flea in your ear."

The woman blinked and smiled vaguely. "I beg your pardon, dear?"

"You heard her well enough. No tricks," said Conhoon.

She blinked again, then gave a sudden merry laugh. "Gracious me, what a mix-up! Tricks! You must think I'm.... Oh me, oh my. Child, I'm your fairy godmother! I came just as soon as I heard you mention marrying."

Kate frowned. "So that's why you're here, is it?"

"Oh, you'll make such a lovely bride, you dear, dear little thing! I have just the gown for you. Oh, my, yes! And I have the perfect slippers, very plain, the purest white...you'll *adore* them, I know you will!" she gushed, clapping her hands. She studied Conhoon for a moment and then asked Kate, "Is this the gentleman who will give you away?"

"I'll give nobody away. Kate O'Farrissey is my apprentice. She's been my apprentice for seven years and she'll be my apprentice for seventy more if I say so."

"Now, don't you be a naughty old grouch," said the fairy godmother, wagging her forefinger playfully at him. "Our little Kate is old enough to be thinking of marriage, and you mustn't stand in her way. All those fine young lads out in the garden and under the trees, and dozens more hurrying here to pay court — why, she'll have her pick of the finest, handsomest men in Ireland!"

"Sure, there's not one of them good enough for her. The girl's got the makings of a wizard. Am I to let her throw it all away to go cook and clean and keep house for a bumpkin?"

With a scornful laugh, Kate said, "Will you listen to the kindness of that one? He'll spare me all that so I can cook and clean and keep house for a wizard."

"Wizard?" The fairy godmother appeared confused.

"I am Conhoon of the Three Gifts. And sweetness to people who appear in my kitchen and interfere with my apprentice is not a gift I have, or wish to have."

"No one told me about this. I was notified that one of my girls was contemplating marriage, but there was no mention of wizardry."

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"And who did the notifying, I'd like to know?" Kate asked.

"One of my assistants. They keep an eye on all my girls. Just as soon as you mentioned your interest in marrying, I was informed and I came directly here to give you the advice and help a girl needs at such a time."

"Did you, now? And where were you when the Da ran off with the fairy host? And all the years when I was down on my knees scrubbing the paving-stones, and out breaking clods under the hot sun, and sweeping out the chimney, and repairing the thatch? Where were you then?" Kate said, her voice sharp and her manner accusing.

"Kathleen dear, you must understand, there are very few of us fairy godmothers, and we're kept terribly busy. I'm responsible for the happiness of thousands of young ladies like yourself — "

"It's little enough you do for them," Conhoon observed.

"That's a very unfair remark. I see to it that every one of my girls has a lovely wedding. I give her one day she'll remember for the rest of her life. I think that's very important, and I don't like your comment one bit."

"If you don't like my comments, get out of my kitchen."

Wizard and fairy godmother glared at one another. The atmosphere grew tense. With very little provocation, magic might have been flying back and forth in an unpleasant and damaging manner. Sensing the danger, Kate stepped between them and raised her hands.

"Let us have no more of this. There is a confusion to be cleared up, and I cannot do that in the middle of a brannigan," she said. They continued to look at one another with sullen expressions, and she pointed to the two kitchen chairs. "Sit you down, and listen to me, the both of you." They seated themselves at opposite sides of the table, stiffly, on the edges of their chairs, ready to leap up on the instant. "Sit back. Pay attention. Would you like a glass of milk, Fairy Godmother, or a bit of porridge?"

"No, thank you, dear girl. We do not partake of such nutriment."

"Suit yourself. I want to say — "

"Do you offer me nothing, and this my own house?" Conhoon asked in an aggrieved tone.

"You've had your porridge. Now listen to me." Kate folded her arms and gave each of them a severe look. They remained silent. Satisfied of

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their attention, she began, "I would say three things. First, the idea of a beautiful wedding day which I will remember all my life pleases me very much."

"Go on. Throw your life away," Conhoon muttered, glowering out the window.

Ignoring the interruption, she went on, "Second, when the time comes for me to take a husband, I will be happy to see my fairy godmother, and glad will I be for any advice she gives me and anything she provides in the way of a proper outfit."

"Thank you, dear child. So nice to be appreciated," said her fairy godmother with a sweet smile and a smug glance at the wizard, who growled like an old dog.

"Third, my mention of marriage this morning was speculative in nature. I will marry when and if I please, and I do not please to marry until I find the man who suits me, and I have not found him yet, and from the looks of the lubbers and thickwits moping about this house for two leagues in every direction, I am not likely to find him before I am too old to remember why I wanted him."

"There's the sensible girl," said Conhoon, thumping the table top.

"You mustn't say such things!" cried the fairy godmother, starting up with eyebrows arched in distress. "You mustn't even *think* such things! Why, there are dozens of perfectly splendid young men outside the house this very minute! Dozens, did I say? There are scores! Hundreds!"

"It's well hidden they are," said Kate.

"You don't know how to look, dear child. How could you have learned?" said the fairy godmother with a disdainful glance at Conhoon, who returned a black scowl. "And they have no idea of the proper way to present themselves. Young men are so clumsy."

"They are that. And not enough sense do they have to dodge a mud-ball when it comes at their heads."

Shocked, the fairy godmother said, "Do you *throw* things at your suitors?"

"I do. And seldom do I miss," Kate replied. Conhoon beamed proudly and nodded with satisfaction.

The fairy godmother frowned. "This is more serious than I realized. My dear, you have a great deal to learn."

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"I'll be the judge of what she has to learn. The girl is my apprentice, and I'll have nobody barging in here and filling her head with a lot of fairy tricks," said Conhoon, rising.

"You persist in being offensive. Fairy godparents are not given to tricks."

"Do you tell me so?"

"I most certainly do."

"Well, it's little you know of your own, if you say such a thing," said Conhoon.

"Really? And what do *you* know of fairy godparents?"

"I know my own fairy godfather, and I would not trust him as far as I could throw the Great Rock of Skillygiffin."

The fairy godmother gave a little sniff of mocking laughter. "If you were any kind of a wizard, you could throw the Great Rock of Skillygiffin from here to the ocean by speaking a simple phrase."

Reddening, Conhoon cried, "Do you hear that? Do you hear her twisting my own words to turn them against me?"

"Good for her," said Kate, smiling.

"It's a fairy trick. They're full of them. Carmody was the worst of the lot, but this one's near as bad."

"And who's Carmody?" Kate asked.

"My fairy godfather. The shiftiest man I ever met. The first time he ever visited me he tried to borrow money, and the second time, he stole my clean shirt. That's the way of fairy godfathers and godmothers, girl, and don't be fooled by the smiles of this one. She's full of tricks."

"My dear child," said the fairy godmother, pointedly ignoring him, "this person stands condemned by his own words. It is our practice to match fairy godparents as closely as we can to their human charges."

"And are you matched to me?" Kate asked.

"Obviously. You are beautiful and charming, though sadly untaught. If this person," she said with a contemptuous flick of the hand, "was assigned to a shiftless, pilfering fairy godparent...well, I should think the conclusion is inescapable."

"Will you listen to the slyness of the woman? The lie is so big it would choke her, so she hints at it to delude the poor girl. Sure, they have no shame at all," said Conhoon.

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"This is really too much to be borne. Kathleen, dear, you must place yourself in my hands at once. If you delay, it may be too late."

"Don't believe a word of it, girl," Conhoon said.

Fairy godmother and wizard locked eyes over the kitchen table. She gave her wand a little prefatory shake. He pushed back his sleeves once again, to allow for free gesturing. The time for talk had clearly passed. Battle was to be joined.

"Stop it, the two of you!" Kate commanded. "I'll have no magic wars in this kitchen!"

"Then make him behave!" cried the fairy godmother as Conhoon howled, "Then get her out of this house!"

After a moment's taut silence, the fairy godmother's expression softened to a winning smile. "No need for all this fuss. I will leave the house. But I will return twelve times, with a suitor each time, so my darling girl can make her choice of a husband," she said.

"Fairy tricks," Conhoon muttered.

"Twelve times? There aren't twelve out there worth a pail of ashes," Kate said with a toss of her head.

"Why don't you just leave it all up to me, dear? I'll choose the most suitable one and bring him in here — "

"You will not," Kate cut in. "I will choose for myself. Pick the three best, and I'll have a look at them."

"That's a very sensible decision, Kathleen dear. Three is such a fraught number. Very wise of you. I'll be right back," said the fairy godmother, and vanished.

"What are you doing to yourself, girl?" Conhoon asked in a pained voice. "Will you throw your life away on one of that lot?"

"I'll let her weed out the worst."

"And you'll throw yourself away on the leavings. I should have known better. The O'Farrisseys are all thick. You could have been a fine wizard, and what'll become of you now? In twenty years you'll be a worn-out old cailleach, covered with wrinkles and not a tooth in your head, with twenty kids to feed and a husband to support, and devil a bit of help will your fairy godmother be to you then."

"And if I stay here, in twenty years I'll be just as old, and not even in my own house."

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"Ah, but if you're a wizard, you'll look and feel as young as you please, and have a long life ahead of you. You need not look a day older or a day worse than you do this very minute, if you choose."

Kate gazed hard at him for a moment without speaking, then lowered her eyes and pondered his words. Before she could respond, her fairy godmother returned, leading a slender, nervous young man. He was a comely lad, with pitch-black hair and dark eyes, and a sensitive look to him. He wore bright, neatly fitted clothing, and a green cloak fastened by a jeweled pin. In one hand he carried a small harp.

"This is Fleary, Kathleen dear. He's a minstrel," said the fairy godmother. "Come in, Fleary. Don't be afraid."

Bowing deeply to Kate, nodding to Conhoon, Fleary said, "Peace to all in this house."

Conhoon made an ominous noise deep in his throat and Fleary took a step back. The fairy godmother tugged him forward. "Fleary has written a song in praise of you, Kathleen. Play it, Fleary."

The minstrel seemed to throw off his nervousness as easily as he tossed back his short cloak. He cradled the harp in the crook of his arm, smiled at each of those present in turn, then fixed a loving gaze on Kate and began to sing in a high clear voice, accompanying himself with sweet music.

"Kathleen Aroon, my Kate, beloved, fairest of women,
A beauty without flaw, she makes my heart tremble;
The hair of her red as fire, a curtain of flame,
A bright veil fluttering over her beauty;
Her eyes as blue as the sky at midsummer
Seen through the leaf-spaces of the hardy oak,
Star-bright, blinding bright, brighter than moon
Or sun are her eyes upon me.
Smooth and white as marble is her brow,
Fair it is and free of wrinkle as new-fallen snow.
A kiss from her soft lips would ease the pain
Of twenty thousand mortal wounds,
And make the dying man to skip and dance
And the dead man sing in his shroud for joy."

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Fleary struck a final chord and let the sound die into silence. He looked at Kate to see her reaction. She said nothing. At last the fairy godmother spoke.

"Well, now, Kathleen, wasn't that a lovely song?"

"Oh, lovely it was altogether. I will not soon hear a lovelier, I am sure of that," said Kate.

"Then you'll choose Fleary?"

"I will not. I do not want to be wife to a man who can make a lovelier woman with his words than I can ever be. Good day to you, minstrel. Bring in the next one, Fairy Godmother."

Fleary left, looking dejected. The fairy godmother vanished again. When they were alone, Kate said to Conhoon, "It is fine, what you say, but I will not be a wizard in twenty years. It takes longer than that."

"Not for you, girl. You're the ninth daughter of a ninth daughter, didn't you tell me that?"

"I did."

"And born at night?"

"I was."

"Well, then, you have a start on the rest of them, with your natural talent and all. I tell you, girl, I've got you reading books that I was not even allowed to name until my thirty-second year of study, and you at it only seven," said Conhoon, leaning toward her and lowering his voice to a conspiratorial level.

"Is it the truth you tell me?"

"I am no fairy godmother, filling your head with silliness. You have the gift. You'd be spelling with the best of them in twenty years. Fifteen, if you work hard."

"And how can I work hard when I'm — " Kate began, but her fairy godmother's return ended the colloquy.

The suitor who strode behind the fairy godmother was tall and graceful in his bearing, magnificent in his person. His hair was the color of polished amber, his piercing eyes a deep green, his open countenance pleasing and of a ruddy hue betokening health and vigor. His flowing cloak was a bright scarlet, and a shirt of the purest white, deep-bordered in gold thread, was next to his fair skin. His sandals were buckled with gold, his two spears were trimmed with gold, and golden decorations embellished

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his scarlet shield. He stooped to pass through the kitchen door, and when, inside the room, he stood erect and smiled, it seemed as though the sun had risen before them.

"This is Fialan of the Golden Spears, Kathleen dear. He's a great warrior, a hero famed in song and story, and the third handsomest man in Ireland," said the fairy godmother.

"That is good to know. And where are the two handsomer?" Kate asked.

"They are my brothers, and they are both married," said Fialan in a deep melodious voice. "And if you will marry me, Kate O'Farrissey, I will study to become handsomer than both of them, and will also conquer the world for you. I have already overcome the warriors and princes and kings of this island, and for your sake I will go forth and do battle against the world's finest and fiercest heroes, and claim their kingdoms for you, and make them kneel in homage to your beauty. Black men and white men will I meet in battle, and red men and yellow, and their women as well if it be their custom. On foot, on horseback, or from my chariot will I fight them, on land or neck-deep in water, or in boats on the sea, on mountaintops or in dark caves or on the sun-tormented plain. And when I have overcome them I will write sweet poetry to their memories, and I will bring peace and order to their kingdoms, and give them law and a useful alphabet."

"That is very thoughtful of you, but it is entirely unnecessary," said Kate.

"It is the most necessary thing of all, my fairest Kate, for haven't I sworn to do all these things for the woman I marry?"

Kate folded her arms, studied him for a time, and said, "May she appreciate it, then. It's a poor husband you'll be if you mean to spend your life bashing strangers and then writing poems about them."

The fairy godmother flew to her side and whispered urgently, "Don't let this one get away!"

"I'll choose for myself." Turning to Fialan and smiling graciously, Kate said, "Good luck in your travels and your battles, Fialan of the Golden Spears. I hope you find a woman who appreciates your efforts. I do not."

Fialan bade them farewell with elegant words and withdrew. The fairy godmother frowned at Kate and tapped her wand irritably in the palm

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of her hand. "You're very pretty, Kathleen, but I think you're being just a bit choosy for a girl without a dowry," she said at last.

"She's a dowry herself. A fine fairy godmother it is who can't see that," said Conhoon.

"It's the principle of the thing. A girl without a dowry simply does not reject the sweetest singer in all of Ireland and the mightiest hero. It isn't done."

"Sure, didn't I just do it?" said Kate, looking proud of the fact.

"And if she does, she has the tact not to boast of it," the fairy godmother said with manifest annoyance. "You're not making my work any easier, Kathleen."

"I didn't ask for your help. Many a time would I have been glad of a helping hand, but devil a bit of you did I see in those days."

"I told you, dear, I'm very busy. I have only a little bit of time to devote to each of my girls, so I try to make myself available when I'm needed most. And every girl needs her fairy godmother when she's choosing a husband."

"I haven't chosen one yet."

"You will, dear," said the fairy godmother. Her smile radiated serene confidence. "We'll settle this whole thing today, so I won't have to be rushing back and forth every time you...well, I'd better get outside and find the proper suitor."

When she was gone, Kate turned to Conhoon and said, "Fifteen years, you tell me?"

"If you work hard, and do not let yourself be distracted by fairy tricks and lovesick ninnies, you can be done with your apprenticeship in fifteen years."

"And what does that mean? No more studying?"

"Are you daft, girl? Your studies will only be beginning, but you'll be on your own."

She weighed that, and then asked, "And how hard must I work for these fifteen years?"

It was Conhoon's turn to ponder. After a time, he said, "Six hours a day at the books and six hours at practice."

"And with all the work around here, when am I supposed to sleep?"

"Sleep? You're not apprentice to a sleeper, girl, you're apprentice to a wizard."

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"It's a staggering wreck I'll be in fifteen years, and no wizard at all. Do you take me for a fool? I'd be better off married to a beggar — "

"I'm back, dear," said the fairy godmother as she popped through the doorway. She turned to beckon to a raggedy fellow who trailed behind her, head lowered, back bent. Bags hung from his shoulders and belt. A drinking horn was thrust into his belt, and various objects of uncertain purpose and no clear identity were tucked about his garments or depending therefrom. He pulled off his shabby dust-coated hat and ducked his head in greeting.

"A fine choice you made," said Conhoon.

The fairy godmother shrugged. "The others are all gone. Fleary's failure discouraged them, but when Kathleen refused Fialan, they all decided they hadn't a chance. Only this fellow was left, and he's not a suitor. All he wants is a crust of bread and a sup of water."

"Give him the bread and water, Kate, and let him and this one be off, the way you can get back to work," said Conhoon.

"Let the poor man sit down," said Kate. "There's porridge left, and milk in the pitcher. Sit you down, beggarman."

In a weak, piping voice, the beggar said, "It's unworthy I am to sit in such company. Throw the food in the dirt, the way I'll scrabble for it like the creatures of the farmyard. That's good enough for the likes of meself."

"You will sit at the table and eat decent food in decent surroundings, you poor man," said Kate, pulling out her own chair for him.

The beggarman leaned his staff in the corner, dropped his torn and dusty hat to the floor, unloaded his heaviest bags, and shuffled to the offered place. The fairy godmother looked on in silence. Conhoon studied their guest, but he too remained silent. Kate set a bowl of tepid porridge and the pitcher of milk before him and stood maternally by, wiping her hands on her apron, as he gulped down the food.

"It's a grand lady you are to do such a kind deed," said the beggar when he was done.

Kate refilled the bowl. As he dug in, she said, "It's little enough to do for a poor unfortunate man with rags to his back and the feet showing through his shoes. Eat your fill, beggarman, and when you're done I'll find you clothes to wear and a pair of boots for your feet."

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"You're too good entirely," the beggar mumbled through a mouthful of porridge.

"And where will you get all this, girl?" Conhoon asked.

"Haven't you got a chest of clothes in your room that you haven't worn in years, and couldn't fit into if you tried? It's little good they do you, and here's a poor soul in need."

"Bless you, dear lady," piped the beggar.

"It's generous you are with my clothes," Conhoon grumbled.

"Don't begrudge them to a man in want. Tell me, beggarman," Kate said, turning to the wretch, "What is it has brought you so low? Is it a curse you'd be wanting removed?"

"It is something far worse than a curse has destroyed me, lady, it is me own weakness and pride and greed. I was once a great scholar, and could converse on all philosophical matters in language so wise that not three men in Ireland and two more over the seas could understand a word of it. But the pride grew in me, and I turned to the pursuit of forbidden knowledge. And this is my punishment." Here the beggarman paused to heave a reedy sigh, which brought on a coughing fit that lasted several minutes. The fairy godmother looked on expectantly as Kate clasped her hands and exhibited deep concern.

"Are you all right, beggarman?" she asked as his pinched face turned a deep red.

"Oh, I'm grand," he gasped.

"Tell us, then — What happened to you in your pursuit?" Conhoon asked, leaning forward with a show of interest.

"Late one night, when all was dark and still and meself stewing over a petty insult and aching for revenge, I opened a book that no man has dared to open for six thousand years. I began to speak the words of a spell that once drowned an entire continent of innocent harmless people and caused havoc across the world. It was the last straw. All around me the spirits of earth and air, fire and frost, wood and water, the elements and the seasons and all living things combined to strip me of me power and wisdom and leave me the broken beggarman you see before you," he concluded.

"Sure, they'll do that to a man," said Conhoon, nodding.

Kate wiped away a tear with her apron. "You poor suffering creature. Is there no help for you?"

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"Only one thing can save me: the love of a sweet young lass who has powers of her own but has never put them to wicked uses. She must walk the weary dusty roads with me for ten long years, filthy and ragged, starving and shivering, and never a word of complaint out of her, and at the end of that time, the curse will begin to fade. Ah, but where," he wailed, "Where will a sorry stick of a man like me find such a woman?"

"You dear, sad man," Kate cried, "look no farther! You have found — "

"Stop, Kate!" Conhoon roared, rising with such speed and fervor that his chair toppled over backward. Pointing to the fairy godmother, he said wrathfully, "It's one of her tricks, and he's in it with her. But they can't deceive Conhoon. This one is no more a beggarman than I'm a fairy godmother!"

The beggar rose and bowed to him. "You are perceptive, sir," he said, and in his thin voice was a new ring of authority. He turned to the fairy godmother. "No need for this masquerade to continue. Restore me."

With a sad shake of her head, she tapped him gently with her wand. The beggarman vanished, and in his place stood a splendidly dressed youth, fair-haired and somewhat rabbity looking, but with the air of one accustomed to being obeyed. Ignoring the others, he dropped to one knee and said to Kate, "I am no beggarman but a prince, as is now obvious. I agreed to this subterfuge to win you, fair lady, because I trusted to the kindness of your heart. And now that you see to what desperate lengths I am willing to go, will you not come with me and be my wife?"

Eyes blazing, Kate said, "I'll not marry a man who deceives me. If you'll play a trick to win a woman, what tricks will you not play once the poor defrauded creature is married to you? Be off with you, prince — but not you, Fairy Godmother. There is explaining to be done before you leave this house."

The prince departed with a bow and a flourish and not a word of farewell. The fairy godmother looked utterly crestfallen. "My dear child, it was all for your own good. You must trust your fairy godmother," she said a trifle nervously.

"Carmody used to talk that way. Sure, they're all the same," said Conhoon.

"It's eager you are to see me married if you'll stoop to plotting with strangers," Kate said.

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"I'm only thinking of your happiness, dear. Besides, he's not a stranger. His sister was my godchild."

"He's a stranger to this house, and a stranger he'll remain. Tell me straight — why do you want me married so quick?"

"Well, my dear, as I explained, we're very shorthanded. I'm ever so busy. There's just no time...so many demands...and if I can fulfill my obligation...bring you to closure, so to speak...then I'll be free to...I'll be at liberty to assist...," the fairy godmother waffled, looking everywhere but at them, fumbling with her wand.

"If you get the girl married, you're quit of her. Is that what you're telling the poor child?" said Conhoon.

"That's putting it very crudely."

"Is it the truth?" Kate asked.

The fairy godmother's round face settled into a pout. A tear welled in one eye, overflowed, and ran down her cheek. "You don't care, any of you," she said, her voice choked with feeling.

"If it isn't tricks, it's tears," said Conhoon.

"You don't know what it's like! It's just rush, rush, rush and not a bit of help from anyone. I'm run off my feet!"

"Use your wings," Conhoon said.

"My wings!" she wailed, turning to display her back. "Look at them! They're practically worn through! And look at the muscular development — I'm more like a barbarian swordsman than a fairy godmother! And this is what I get — mockery, accusation, insults!" She threw herself into the empty chair, laid her head on her arm, and burst into sobs.

Conhoon and Kate exchanged a guilty glance. Kate laid a gentle hand on the fairy godmother's beefy shoulder and said in a soft voice, "There, now. It isn't as bad as that. We'll say no more about it."

The fairy godmother took her hand. She sniffed, wiped her eyes, and said, "You should have been one of the easy ones, Kathleen dear. With your fresh innocent beauty, and your quick wits, even without a dowry you could have been married off in minutes. Oh, you wouldn't believe some of the creatures I have to find husbands for — ugly as dirt, and dull, and mean. There's one miller's daughter who's taken up half my time for the past six years, and I just know I'll have her on my hands for six more. And she has three younger sisters, and they're worse than she is."

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"You need not worry about me any more. I'm thinking I'll take my sweet time, and choose for myself when I'm ready."

"I can't abandon you, Kathleen. Professional obligations, you know. I must do *something* for you."

Kate looked at her, then at Conhoon, and grinned. "Could you find a good strapping wife for my Uncle Con?"

"What are you saying, girl?!" Conhoon cried in horror.

"I'm saying I need help with the work. Could you do it, Fairy Godmother?"

"I'm afraid not, dear. He'd have to arrange that through his fairy godfather. And Mr. Carmody...well, there's a matter of nonpayment of dues, and disorderly behavior at an assembly, and questionable dealings with a pooka...as well as other things I prefer not to mention. Besides, dear, I do not arrange marriages simply to procure household help."

Conhoon, pale and looking shaken, said, "Don't do such things to me, Kate. I know you were joking, but it's a cruel joke."

Kate smiled and said nothing. Conhoon looked very uneasy. He turned to the fairy godmother and asked, "Is there nothing you can do for the girl?"

She shook her head. "Kathleen does not wish to marry at present, nor does she wish my assistance when she does. What else can I do?"

"Tell me this," said Kate. "If I was in need of a ride to some prince's grand ball, could you turn mice into horses and lizards into footmen for me, and turn a rat into a coachman to handle it all?"

"Of course, dear. We do that all the time."

"You'll not do it here," said Conhoon. "There's not a rat nor a mouse for a hundred leagues. And not a lizard in all of Ireland."

"Rats and mice and lizards are not essential. Anything will do...cats, dogs, hedgehogs...any animal within reason."

"Pigs?" Kate asked.

"Pigs are excellent subjects. Very intelligent creatures, pigs, especially if you get them while they're young. I always enjoy doing pigs."

With a gesture to the doorway, Kate said, "Would you step outside with me, Fairy Godmother?"

When they were gone, Conhoon allowed himself a great sigh of relief. A crisis had come, and passed, and Kate's future was safe. She had the gift,

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no doubt of that, and if she applied herself she would be a fine wizard in twenty years or so. It would not be easy, what with all the work to be done around the house. But she was young and strong. An hour or two of sleep every now and then and a dash of cold water in the face of a morning and she'd be ready for anything. The books would be getting harder, the practice more intricate, but she could manage. The O'Farrisseys were tough.

And he resolved to be generous. An hour to herself every month, to do as she liked. No one could ask for more. If they did, they would not get it from Conhoon. It's bad business to spoil an apprentice. Spoiled apprentices make soft wizards, he told himself.

He was recalling, with grim satisfaction, the hardships of his own apprentice days when he heard the tramp of heavy feet outside the window. More lovesick layabouts, he thought darkly, and rose to send them on their way, but paused when Kate and her fairy godmother, looking very pleased with themselves, entered the kitchen.

"Who's that lot outside?" he asked.

"It's only the servants," Kate said, and she and her fairy godmother burst into laughter.

"Servants? What are you talking about, girl?"

"Come outside," said Kate, tugging him by the arm.

Outside the door stood six young men. They were obviously brothers. All had similar round faces, heavy jowls, turned-up noses, and pale eyebrows over small dark eyes. They wore identical brand-new outfits. As he studied them in wonderment, they each raised a stubby hand to their forehead in greeting and said, "Good morning, Master Conhoon." Their voices were deep, and they articulated their words in a grunting, nasal manner.

"Do you remember the six shoats I was thinking of bringing to market? Well, now they're our servants," Kate said. "And will you look at the pigsty?"

Conhoon looked, and gasped in surprise. Where a rickety pigpen had stood was now a tidy cottage of ample size to house six husky men in comfort. It was a nice little piece of magic, and he unbent sufficiently to acknowledge it as such.

"Why, thank you. Kate didn't ask for the cottage, you know. It was a

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little extra present — to make up for any difficulty I may have caused," the fairy godmother said.

"What shall we name them?" Kate asked.

"Name the laziest one Carmody. You can call the rest whatever you like," said Conhoon. "And will they do the work for you?"

"Once I teach them, they'll do it all."

"And how long will it take to teach them?"

"No need for you to do a thing. I'll attend to that. They'll be ready by lunchtime," the fairy godmother said.

"Then get to my workroom, girl," said Conhoon. "You've wasted a whole morning on foolishness. It's time you got down to your studies."

"Say 'Ahhh.'"

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SCIENCE

PAT MURPHY & PAUL DOHERTY

A VISIT TO MARS

FOR MORE than a century, science fiction writers have been transporting people to Mars.

Back in 1912, Edgar Rice Burroughs sent John Carter to Mars, where this former officer of the Confederate Army had many adventures and fell in love with a princess. (Burrough's books are among the many in which men travel to Mars and fall in love. Pat's favorite discovery, in our brief survey of early sf about Mars, is the 1893 novel *Unveiling a Parallel: A Romance* by Alice Ilgenfritz Jones and Ella Marchant, in which a young man visits Mars and is shocked by the emancipated women there. But among them, he finds the woman of his dreams. Go figure.)

Recently NASA sent a couple of six-wheeled Rovers named Spirit and Opportunity to Mars. To date, neither vehicle has turned up any women (princess, emancipated, or otherwise). But these robotic explorers have returned a great deal of information on the Martian environment.

As part of his job at the Exploratorium, San Francisco's museum of science, art, and human perception, Paul used information from the Mars Rovers to give people a chance to experience aspects of the Martian environment. We thought those of you who missed the opportunity at the Exploratorium might like some instructions on how to experience aspects of the Martian environment in the comfort of your own home. No Martian princess is required for this experience — and emancipated women are welcome.

SEEING MARS

A good way to experience the look of Mars while keeping your feet on terra firma is to don a pair of "Blue Blocker" sunglasses. The lenses of these sunglasses are

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sandy-butterscotch in color. Put them on, and the world around you will look a lot more like Mars — particularly if you are standing in a desert area without any vegetation.

Now when John Carter arrived on Mars, he didn't comment on the color of the sky. He was busy fighting aliens mere moments after his arrival, so perhaps he can be forgiven for that oversight. But you, as an armchair traveler to Mars, can take your time in examining the Martian sky in the photos of Mars available on the Exploratorium's Mars Website *www.exploratorium.edu/mars*. You'll immediately notice that the sky is not a lovely blue, but rather a dusty butterscotch brown.

The Martian atmosphere is full of dust and the dust of Mars is butterscotch tan. This dust is primarily "weathered limonite," a brown iron oxide. Mars's surface dust may also include red hematite, Fe_2O_3 (one of the main ingredients of rust on Earth) and magnetite, Fe_3O_4, a magnetic mineral. The dust is blown into the sky on Mars by winds and settles out slowly. The finest dust remains suspended for a very long time since it is never washed out of the air by rain.

Without this dust, the sky of Mars would be black, as is the sky on Earth at 115,000 feet above sea level. That's the elevation at which the Earth's atmosphere has the same density as the atmosphere at the surface of Mars. To get an idea of what the clear Mars sky might look like, glance out the window of your airliner the next time you are on an intercontinental flight cruising at 45,000 feet. If you look up at the sky at that altitude, you'll see a sky that's a blue so dark as to be almost black. If you could fly higher the sky would be black as it would be on Mars if the atmosphere were free of dust.

The dust in the Martian atmosphere makes sunsets particularly interesting. On Earth we have red sunsets in a blue sky. The sky is blue because blue light scatters when it encounters molecules in the atmosphere. Red light goes straight, without scattering. When you're watching the sun set, the light traveling straight from the sun to your eyes moves at an angle through the Earth's atmosphere. As the light passes through the atmosphere, the blue light scatters away, leaving reddish light to reach your eyes.

The color of light scattered by a particle depends partly on the particle's size. Molecules in Earth's atmosphere are the right size to

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scatter blue light. Martian dust particles, on the other hand, are the right size to scatter red light. When light from the setting sun passes through the Martian atmosphere, red light scatters and blue light continues in the forward direction. As a result, the setting sun on Mars is blue-green, surrounded by the butterscotch-colored sky.

If you visit the Exploratorium's Mars Website to check out the sky, spend a bit of time perusing the other photos as well. Each Mars Exploration Rover carries nine black-and-white digital cameras. One camera gives geologists a close-up view of the Martian rocks, acting as a magnifying lens. The other eight are arranged in pairs. Views from these paired cameras are used to create 3-D images of the Martian landscape. (You need two cameras to make a 3-D view for the same reason you need two eyes to see in depth. Each camera provides a slightly different view of the landscape. Combining these views creates a 3-D image.)

The Rovers' panoramic cameras have filter wheels that rotate in front of each lens, so that photos can be taken through different filters. Using red, green, and blue filters, the cameras can take photos that can be combined to make an image that resembles what a human eye would see on Mars.

In addition, there are several infrared filters that let the cameras create images using infrared radiation. (Infrared radiation is a form of light that's just outside the range of human vision.) Snakes with infrared vision and geologists both appreciate the value of infrared images. Rattlesnakes and other pit vipers use their infrared-sensitive pits to make a 3-D, infrared image of the world. In this view, warm-blooded mice are bright against the cool night background of desert rocks — a handy thing if you're a snake looking for dinner.

Geologists, who generally aren't looking for mice to eat, use infrared imaging for other purposes. Silicate minerals that look uniformly reddish brown in visible light look entirely different in the infrared. That's why so many images from the Mars Rovers are taken using infrared filters. This means that many of the images coming back from Mars aren't in true color — geologists use infrared filters instead of red filters so that they can learn more about the rocks surrounding the Rovers.

This use of infrared filters is a great example of how scientists choose to capture images using

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different forms of light (including light that's beyond the range of human vision). In false-color infrared images of Earth, trees are red, clean water is black, but rocks have interesting and subtle shades — obviously a palette of colors chosen by a geologist.

You can look at lots and lots of rocks in the photos that were sent back from Mars — great fun for geologists, but Pat thinks it gets a bit dull for those of us raised on Burroughs. But there are other things to check out as well. Each Mars Rover carries a sundial, and images of those sundials are among those on the Exploratorium Website. Scientists use these sundials to adjust the Rovers' panoramic cameras, and students participating in NASA's "Red Rover Goes to Mars" program can monitor the sundials to track time on Mars.

On Mars, only half the light hitting the sundial's surface comes from the Sun; the other half comes from the sky. When you check out the images of the sundial on the Exploratorium's Website, take a close look at the shadow of the gnomon, the upright in the center of the sundial. The shadow is not completely black because light from the sky shines into the shadow.

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Smelling Mars

Back in Burroughs's day, a stalwart hero (like John Carter) could arrive on Mars (or Barsoom, as the Martians called it) stark naked — and still survive. (The mysterious force that brought John Carter to Mars mysteriously left his clothes behind.) But Carter (and many of the other visitors to Mars in early science fiction) had no trouble breathing the air.

It was fortunate for John Carter that he was protected by an author who was not noted for scientific verisimilitude. In truth, if you were to step naked onto the surface of Mars, all the gas inside you would come out through every orifice in your body. You would remain conscious for ten to fifteen seconds. Your ears would "pop" as they adjusted to Martian pressure. After fifteen seconds your blood would boil.

On top of all that, the atmosphere doesn't have enough oxygen to sustain you. The Martian atmosphere is ninety-five percent carbon dioxide. In the Martian atmosphere, only one out of a thousand molecules is oxygen. (On Earth, it's more like two hundred and ten out of a thousand.) On both Earth and Mars, most of the remainder of the atmosphere is nitrogen and argon.

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If you want to find out what Mars smells like, open a bottle of unflavored soda water and take a sniff from the neck of the bottle. That aroma of carbon dioxide is the smell of Mars.

At the Exploratorium we put a block of dry ice (that's solid carbon dioxide) into an empty fish tank. After a while, the carbon dioxide sublimes (making the transition from solid ice to gas without ever becoming liquid). Carbon dioxide gas fills the fish tank. Since carbon dioxide is heavier than Earth air, the gas will stay in the tank until you sweep your hand through it.

Sweep some of the carbon dioxide gas into your nose. Stick out your tongue and plunge it into the top of the tank and you will experience the tangy taste of Martian air.

Lighting Fires on Mars

If you were to lower a burning candle into the fish tank, it would go out. An ordinary fire, where hydrocarbons combine with oxygen to produce carbon dioxide and water vapor, will not burn in the Martian atmosphere.

But that doesn't mean you can't have fire on Mars. Our friend Eric Muller, a teacher at the Exploratorium, can make a fire that burns quite well in a carbon dioxide atmosphere. Eric takes two slabs of dry ice and carves a hemispherical hollow in the center of one block. He fills the hollow with powdered magnesium, lights the magnesium, and puts the second flat block over the first. A bright glow shines through the dry ice blocks for a long time as the magnesium cheerfully burns in the carbon dioxide atmosphere.

When the fire goes out, a quick look into the center of the dry ice blocks reveals a collection of black carbon and white magnesium oxide. The burning magnesium rips oxygen from the carbon dioxide in order to burn, leaving carbon behind.

There is an important life-lesson here for Earthlings: never try to put out a metal fire with a carbon dioxide fire extinguisher. If you do, you'll be spraying oxidizer onto the burning metal.

The lesson for anyone camping on Mars is simple: if you want to make a campfire, don't forget to bring along some magnesium logs.

Listening to Mars

We have a vacuum chamber at the Exploratorium, which allows us to reduce the pressure inside the chamber to Martian atmospheric

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pressure. We put a tape player and a tape recorder into the chamber at Earth pressure and then pump the chamber down to Martian surface pressure, which is only about one percent of the pressure on Earth. (Meteorologists call this pressure ten millibars.)

Under Martian atmospheric conditions, the sound picked up by the recorder gets much quieter. When we let Earth air pressure back into the chamber, the sound grows loud again. Sound does travel through the thin air of Mars, but not as well as sound travels on Earth. It is harder to make loud sounds and harder to hear them.

The Mars Polar Lander carried a microphone but it failed to land safely so we don't have direct measurements yet of the sounds of Mars. If the recorder had worked, we might have been able to hear the wind whispering around the rocks.

Touching Mars

The Rovers can't transmit the tactile sensation of Mars. Their instruments dust off rocks, take photos, drill into rocks, and analyze the dust. Yet here you sit ten or more light-minutes away from the Martian surface, longing to touch Mars rocks.

You can fulfill that desire by visiting the Exploratorium (which is a lot closer than Mars). We have a small piece of a rock from Mars.

Back in October of 1962, a meteorite landed about ten feet away from a farmer in a Nigerian corn field. This forty-pound chunk of rock, known as the Zagami meteorite, was sliced up, distributed to various museums, and studied extensively. In 1995, scientists analyzed gas contained in bubbles in the meteorite. They discovered that the composition of the gas matched that of the Martian atmosphere. Scientists now think that a comet or asteroid slammed into Mars about 2.5 million years ago, flinging the rock that became the Zagami meteorite into space.

An enterprising meteorite dealer managed to trade other specimens from his collection for chunks of the Zagami meteorite — and offered slivers of this Martian rock for sale. The Exploratorium has only a small piece because Martian meteorites are among the rarest rocks on Earth. Like diamonds, they're priced by the carat. Slivers of the Zagami meteorite sold for hundreds of times the price of gold.

The rock of the Zagami meteorite is greenish-gray basalt with crystals big enough to see with a geologist's hand lens. It feels rough to the touch. It is quite a wonderful

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sensation to actually run your finger along a piece of Mars.

Worth a Visit?

The science fiction writers who wrote about Mars when it was just a blurry image in a telescope let their imaginations run wild, giving Mars a population, a breathable atmosphere, and a network of canals. Their work inspired kids who grew up to be scientists interested in finding out what Mars was really like. These scientists and engineers (emancipated women and men) sent robot representatives to Mars. Now that the robots have sent back a more up-to-date portrayal of Mars, it's up to the science fiction writers to weave that new vision of the Red Planet into their fiction.

To learn more about Pat Murphy's science fiction writing, visit her web site at *www.brazenhussies.net/murphy*. For more on Paul Doherty's work and his latest adventures, visit *www.exo.net/~pauld*.

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One of our greatest writers, Gene Wolfe seems to be particularly fecund of late, with short stories appearing with delightful frequency in Asimov's, Realms of Fantasy, *thither and here. Which is not to overlook the imminent publication of his novel* Wizard, *a companion to his popular and well-received novel* Knight, *nor should we neglect to mention that a new story collection entitled* Innocents Aboard *has been published recently.*

All these notes, however, serve as mere sleight-of-hand to distract you from the following epistolary tale, a fascinating fantasy for which no introduction could conceivably prepare readers adequately.

The Little Stranger

By Gene Wolfe

Dear Cousin Danny:

PLEASE FORGIVE ME FOR troubling you with another letter. I know you understand. You are the only family I have, and as you are dead you probably do not mind. I am lonely, terribly lonely, living alone way out here. Yesterday I drove into town, and at the supermarket Brenda told me how lucky I am. She has to check groceries all day, keep house, and look after three children. I would love to know whether she divorced him or he divorced her, but I do not like to ask. You know how that is.

And why. I would dearly love to know why.

I said I would trade with her if I could stand up to so much work, which I could not, and I would take her children anytime and take care of them for as long as she wanted. They could run through the woods, I said, play Monopoly and Parcheesi, and explore the old road. I should have said only the girls, but I did not think of that in time, Danny. Not that I have anything against you boys, but I don't know much about them or taking care of them.

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One time Sally Cusick showed me her husband's fish. There was a big lady fish and a little man fish, very shiny and silvery, and Sally said the man fish just came and went and that was that. I said I thought that was about how people were too, but Sally did not agree and has not had me over since although I have had her twice and invited her three times, one time when she said she could not come because the rain, as if rain ever stopped her from going anywhere. She is my nearest neighbor, and I could ride my bicycle down Miller Road and up the County Road and come anytime.

Brenda gave me the name of a plumber friend of hers. It is Jack C. Swierzbowski. I have called him (phoned), and he says he will come.

Every time I turn on the hot water the whole house moans. I think that when I told you about this before, Danny, I said it yelled but it is really more of a moan. Or bellow, like a cow. It is a big house. I know you must remember my house from when you came as a little boy and we played store and all that. Well, probably you remember it bigger than it really is. But it *is* big. Five big bedrooms and all the other rooms like the big cold dining room. I never eat in there anymore. You and I would eat in my merry little kitchen, in the breakfast nook.

If Brenda really sends her girls to me someday that is where we will eat, all three crowded around the little table in the breakfast nook, and for the first day we will make chicken soup and bake brownies and cookies.

There it goes again, and I am not even running the water. Maybe I left it on somewhere, I will see.

Hugs,
Your cousin Ivy

Dear Cousin Danny:

I do not know whether I ever told you what a relief it is to me to write you like this, but it is. I never write to Mama or Papa because I saw them before they were embalmed and everything, and I went to the funerals. But I feel like you are still alive, so I can do it. I put on a stamp but no return address. That nice Mr. Chen at the Post Office said yesterday it might go to the Dead Letter Office, and I said yes that is where I want it to go. I did not even smile, but it was all I could do to keep from laughing out loud.

Mr. Swierzbowski came and worked for three hours and even got up on the roof, three floors up. Then he turned on the water to show me and

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it was as quiet as mice. But last night it was doing it again. I do not think I will call him again. It was almost two hundred dollars and I am so afraid he will fall.

I went for a ramble in the woods after he left, Danny, remembering how you and I played there. If Brenda sends her girls to stay with me for a while, they will go out there and talk about it afterward, and I ought to know the places.

So I started learning today. It is sad to see how much was fields and farms back in the colonial times. Now it is woods all over again and the Mohawks would feel right at home, but they are gone. You can still see the square hole where the old Hopkins place stood, but it is filling up. Father used to say that the Hopkins were the last people around except us. He did not count the Cusicks, because it was too far to see their smoke. When they had a fire in the fireplace, I mean, or burned their leaves. Only I think probably Mr. Swierzbowski could have seen it when he was up on the roof. It is not so far that I could not ride over on my bicycle, Danny, and Sally drives all over.

She does not even feed those fish. Her husband does it.

It might be nicer if I had another cat. I used to have Pussums. She was as nice a cat as ever you saw, a calico and oh so pretty. I did not have her fixed or anything because I thought I would find a nice boy calico for her and they would have pretty kittens. I would give away the ones that were not calicos themselves, but I would keep the calicos and have three or four or even five of them. And then the mice would not come inside in the winter the way they do. It was terrible last winter.

Only Pussums got big and wanted a boy cat, but I had not found one for her yet. And one day she just disappeared. I should have gotten another cat then, I think. I did not because I kept thinking Pussums would come back after she had her little fling. Which she has not done, and it is more than three years.

Hugs,
Your cousin Ivy

Dear Cousin Danny,

Here I am, bothering you again. But a lot has happened since I wrote a week ago, and I really do need to tell somebody.

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One night I was lying in bed and I heard the house moan in the way I have told you about. A few minutes later it did it again, and it did it again a few minutes after that.

Pretty soon I understood why it was so unhappy, Danny. It is just like Pussums. It wants another house. You were a man and would not understand, but I *knew*. It was not from thinking, even if I think a lot and am good at it, my teachers always said. I knew. So I got out of bed and told it as loud as I could that I would get it another house. At first I said a tool shed, but that didn't work, so a house. A little house, but a house.

Well, that is what I am going to do. I am going to talk to people who build houses and have a cottage built right here on my own property. I know they will probably cheat me, but I will have to bear it and keep the cheating as small as I can. I mean to talk to Mr. LaPointe at the bank about it. I know he will advise me, and he is honest.

So that is one thing, but just one. There is another one.

An old truck was going up Miller Road towing a big trailer when it broke down right in front of my house here. There were two men in the truck and two ladies in the trailer, and one lady has a little baby. They are all dark, with curly black hair and big smiles, even the baby.

The older man rang my bell and explained what had happened. He asked if he could pull his truck and the trailer up onto my front lawn until he and the other man could get the truck fixed.

I said all right, but then I thought what if they want to come inside to use the bathroom? Should I let them in? I decided I did not know them well enough to make up my mind about that, but you cannot keep somebody who needs to come inside quickly standing on the porch while you ask questions. I went into the parlor and watched them awhile through the window. They had put the baby on the lawn. The young lady was steering, and the men and the older lady were pushing, because the lawn is higher than Miller Road, and there was the ditch and everything. I could see everyone was working hard, so I made lemonade.

When it was ready they had tied a big chain around the biggest maple. There were zigzag ropes between the chain and their truck, turning and turning around little wheels, and they were pulling on the other end. It was working, too. They had already gotten the front end of their truck up on the grass. I went out and we had lemonade and talked awhile.

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The older man is Mr. Zoltan, and the younger one is Johnny. The older lady is Marmar. Or something like that. I cannot say it like they do. She is Mrs. Zoltan. The young lady is Mrs. Johnny, and the baby is hers. Her name is Ivy, just like mine. Her mother's name is Suzette, and she is really quite pretty.

I never said about the bathroom, but I decided if they asked I would let them come in, especially Suzette. Only they never have. I think they are going in the woods. Now I am somewhat scared about going to bed. What if they break in while I am sleeping?

Well, I just went into the parlor and watched them through the window, and both men are working really hard on their truck, with flashlights to see and the engine in pieces. So I do not think they will break in tonight. They will be too tired. I will write to you again really soon, Danny.

Hugs,
Your cousin Ivy

P.S. The house has been quiet as mice ever since they came.

Dear Cousin Danny:

I have such good news! You will not believe how nicely everything is working out. Mr. Zoltan came to breakfast this morning. It was just bacon and eggs and toast, but he liked it. He drinks a lot of coffee. He said they were poor people, and they need parts for their truck. I said I did not have any, which was the truth. Then he asked if they could stay here until they could earn enough to fix their truck. Not in my house, I said. He said they would live in their trailer, like always, but if they parked it someplace without permission the police would make them leave, and they could not leave here so they would go to jail.

That was when I got my wonderful idea. I get many wonderful ideas, Danny, but this was the most wonderful ever. I explained to Mr. Zoltan that I wanted another house built on my property. Not a big house, just a little one. I said that if he and Johnny would build it for me in their spare time, I would let them stay.

Mr. Zoltan looked at me in a worried kind of way, then looked over at the stove. I said if they could fix a truck they could build a house, and would they do it?

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He told me all over again how poor they were. He said they would have to earn enough to buy wood and shingles and so forth. They could find some things at the dump, he said, but they would have to buy the rest. It might take a long time.

I said that I would not ask them to buy the material, only to build me a little old-fashioned cottage like the picture I showed him. I would buy the material for them. That made him happy, and he agreed at once. He wanted to know where I wanted it built. I said you look around and decide where you think it ought to be and tell me.

So you see, Danny, why I said I had wonderful news. The Willis Lumber Co. in town will not cheat me more than they cheat everybody, and Mr. Zoltan and Johnny will not cheat me either, because I am not going to give them any money at all.

Hugs,
Your cousin Ivy

Dear Cousin Danny,

I had not planned to pester you with another letter as soon as this, but I just have to tell *somebody* how well my plan is going. Mr. Zoltan came to tell me he had found a foundation in the woods we could use. I knew it was the old Hopkins place, but I asked him questions about it, and it was. Then I told him we could not use it because it was not on my land.

It took all the happiness right out of him. He explained that digging the foundation and building the things to hold the cement were going to be some of the hardest work and would take a long while. The old Hopkins foundation is stone, big stone blocks like tombstones, and he said it was as good as new. So I thought, well, I was going to have to pay for the cement and picks and shovels and all that anyway, so perhaps I could buy the land.

When Mr. Zoltan had left, I called up (phoned) Mr. LaPointe and said I wanted the land where the house had been, and a patch in between so I could get there without going off my property. He said how high are you willing to go?

I thought about that, and looked at my bank books and the checking account and all that. I talked to that foreign woman at Merrill Lynch, too. Finally I called Mr. LaPointe back and said fifty thousand. He said he thought he could get it for me cheaper. By that time my mind was made

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up. I have a hard time making up my mind about things sometime, Danny, but when I do it is done. I said to buy me as much of the Hopkins property as fifty thousand would get, only to make sure where the old house was, was the part I was buying.

After that Mr. Zoltan came back twice to talk about other places, but I said wait.

Then (this was Tuesday afternoon, I think, Danny) Mr. LaPointe called me. (Phoned.) He was so happy it made me happy for him. He said he had gotten the whole property for thirty-nine thousand five hundred. The whole farm, only it is all woods now. I went right out and told Johnny, who was working on the truck. And that afternoon he and Mr. Zoltan started shoveling the cellar out. I know they did because I went to see, and it is very black soil, good garden soil I would say and mostly rotted leaves. Compost is what the magazines call it.

I showed them pictures of houses like the one they are going to build for me, and they said they would go to the Willis Lumber Company and buy enough lumber to get started as soon as their truck would run again if I would give them the money. I said no, we will go in my car now and the company will deliver it for a little more money.

Which is what we did. You know how bossy I can be. Suzette needed a ride into town, too, so there were four of us on the drive in. She is opening a shop there to make money. It says "Psychic." I let her out in front of it, and Mr. Zoltan, Johnny, and I went to Willis's. I made them tell me what everything they wanted was and why they wanted it, but I promised that they could keep the scroll saw and the other new tools. We bought a whole keg of nails! And ever so much wood, Danny.

Now I am sitting in the Sun Room to write this, and I can hear their hammers, way off in the woods. If they get quiet before dark, I will go out there and see what the matter is.

Hugs,
Your cousin Ivy

Dear Cousin Danny,

I haven't even mailed that other letter, and here I am writing again. But the envelope is sealed and I do not wish to tear it open. You will get two letters at once, which I hope you will not mind too much.

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There are reasons for this, a big one and a little one. I am going to tell you the little one first, so the big one does not squash it flat. It is that the young lady called me (phoned). She has a cell phone. She said she was Yvonne. I said who? She said Yvonne as plain as anything and she was staying with me. (This is what she said, Danny. It is not true.) Then she said I had given her a ride into town that morning, so I knew it was Suzette. She said she was ready to come home now and there was a friend who would drive her, only she called her a client. But she did not know the roads and neither did her friend.

So I gave her directions, how to find the County Road and how you turn on Miller Road and so on. I know you know already, so I will not repeat everything. Then I sat down and thought hard about the young lady. Could I have remembered her name wrong? I know I could not, not as wrong as that.

So she is fooling her friend, and if she will fool her friend she will fool me. I would like to talk with Marmar about her, but I know Marmar will not talk if I just come up and ask. I must think of something, and writing you these letters helps.

It helps more now, because I know that you get them and read them, Danny. That is my big thing. I know it because I saw you last night. You must have thought I was sleeping. I could see you were being very quiet so as not to wake me up.

But I was awake, sitting by the window looking down at the trailer and Mr. Zoltan's truck. I could not sleep. That is how it is with folks my age. We take naps during the day, and then we cannot sleep at night. I think that it is because God is getting us ready for the grave. Is that right? Did He ever tell you?

You went into the woods to look at my new house. I saw you go and sat up waiting for you to come back. The moon was low and bright when you did, and I got to see it right through you, which was very pretty and something I had never seen before at all. You looked at their truck and even went into the trailer without opening the door, which must be very handy when you are carrying a basket of laundry or grocery bags. When you went back into the woods I waited for you to come out for a while. I thought about coming downstairs and saying hello, but I knew you would think you woke me up. You did not, I just did, and it would not have been

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fair for me to make you feel guilty, as I am sure you would even if I said not to.

But I want you to know that I am often awake, and there is no reason I could not put on a robe and have a nice chat. I could make tea or anything like that which you might like, Danny.

Hugs,
Your cousin Ivy

Dear Cousin Danny,

I have had the nicest time! I must tell you. Yvonne (Suzette) was in town at her shop, and Marmar had ever so much work to do, cooking and cleaning her trailer. So I said I would look after little Ivy for a while. We played peekaboo and had a bottle, and I changed her three times. She is really the dearest little baby in the world! Of course I had to give her back eventually, which I did not like to do. But Mr. Zoltan came and wanted her, and I gave her to him. He looked pale and ill, I thought, and his hands shook. So I did not like to and I am afraid he will give little Ivy something. A really bad cold or the flu. But he is her grandfather, so I did.

Then something very, very odd happened. I cannot explain it and don't even know who to ask. I got to thinking about you, and how much I would like to talk to you. And it came to me that you might not want to come into my house unless you were invited. I know you could walk right through my door like you did into Mr. Zoltan's trailer, but I thought you would probably not want to. I thought of inviting you in this letter, and I do. Just come in anytime, Danny.

What is more, I remembered about the rock. There is this big rock in my flower bed close to the front porch, and I keep it there because it was in Mama's. She had it there because Papa always kept a key under it in case he lost his. Only when he died she took the key away for fear someone would find it and come in.

And I thought, well, I *want* Cousin Danny to come in and talk. So I will just put a key there for him to find, and tell him it is there. I got my extra key from the desk in Papa's study and went outside to put it under the rock.

But when I picked that rock up, there was foreign writing on the bottom. It was yellow chalk, I think, very ugly and new-looking. Just looking at it made me feel sick. I took that rock inside right away and

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washed it in the sink. It made me feel a lot better, and I think it made the rock feel better too. You know what I mean.

Anyway, that rock is all nice and clean now, Danny, and I have put the key under it as a sign that you are welcome to come in anytime. If you pick up the rock and there is bad writing on the bottom, I did not put it there. I do not even have any yellow chalk. Tell me when you come in, and I will wash it off.

But the main thing was little Ivy. She is the darlingest baby, and I just love her.

Hugs,
Your cousin Ivy

Dear Cousin Danny,

In some ways it has been very nice here today, but in others Not So Nice. Let me begin with one of the nice ones, which is Pusson. I went out to see how my new little house was. I had heard a lot of sawing and hammering that morning, and then it had stopped, and I thought I should see what the trouble was. Well, Danny, you would never guess.

It was a cat. Just a cat, not very big and really quite friendly once he gets to know you. He was up on the plywood that Mr. Zoltan and Johnny are going to nail the shingles on. They were afraid of him. Two big men afraid of a little cat! I thought it was silly and said Pussums, Pussums, Pussums! Which was the way I used to call my old cat, and this nice young cat came right down. I let him smell my fingers, and soon he was rubbing my legs.

Yes, Danny, I took Pusson home with me. I think he is really a calico cat under all the black. Other cats are not so friendly and sweet. I have kept Pussums's cat box all ready in case she ever comes home, and Pusson knows how to use it already. So I think he is calico underneath. Pussums found the boy cat she was looking for, and they had children, and this is her son, coming back to the Old Home Place to see how it was when his mama was young. You will think I am just a silly old woman for writing all that, but it could have happened, and since I want to believe it, why should I not be happy?

Besides there is nobody out here for Pusson to belong to except Sally Cusick and she should not have a cat because of all the fish. So he can live here with me, and if Sally ever comes he can hide under the sofa in the parlor.

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The not so nice part is Mr. Cherigate. I did not know him at all until he pulled up in his big car. He was perfectly friendly and drank my tea and petted Pusson, but he told me very firmly that I cannot have Mr. Zoltan and Johnny put in the pipes and the electric like I had planned. Mr. Cherigate is a Building Inspector for the county. He showed me his badge and gave me his card, which I still have on the nice hallmarked silver tray that used to be Mama's when you were here. I must have a licensed plumber for the pipes and an electrician for the electric. I explained that Mr. LaPointe at the bank did not think I would need a building permit way out here, and he said I did not, but a building that people might live in must pass inspection and ever so much more.

Naturally I called Mr. Swierzbowski (phoned). He will do the plumbing, and he will send his friend Mr. Caminiti for the electric. I am sure it will cost ever so much, but I don't think I will be able to get Mr. Zoltan to pay, although I will try.

I am not sure if this is the worst thing or just a funny thing, Danny. Perhaps I will know tomorrow, and if I do I will tell myself that I should have waited and told you all about it then. But I am going to tell you now and let you decide. While Mr. Cherigate was drinking my tea he asked if I knew I was a witch. I thought about it and said I did not, but if it meant I get to ride through the air on a broom and throw down candy to the boys and girls I might do it. He laughed and said no, a real witch, one that cast spells and sours milk while it is still in the cow.

Of course I said I could not do that and I did not think anybody else could either. Mr. Cherigate said there was a rumor going around town that said that, and I explained that there was nobody rooming with me except Pusson. I should have said little Ivy sometimes, too, Danny, but I forgot.

But Mr. Cherigate meant *rumor*. So I had made a silly mistake that I would not have made if it were not for Yvonne (Suzette) telling people she lived here. Then Mr. Cherigate said that he had heard it from his wife, who heard it from a fortune-teller. I said is that the same as psychic and he said it was. So it was Suzette after all! I will talk to her about this the first chance I get, Danny, and I will write you again soon to tell you what I said and what she said.

Hugs!
Your cousin Ivy

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Dear Cousin Danny,

You will not believe what I am going to tell you in this letter, but it is true, every bit.

When I had finished the letter I wrote yesterday, I waited for somebody to bring Suzette (Yvonne) home. Then I went out to the trailer to talk to her. She was inside, and Marmar said she was nursing little Ivy. I certainly did not want to interrupt that and perhaps make little Ivy cry, so I went to my new little house to see whether Mr. Swierzbowski or Mr. Caminiti had come.

They had not, but Mr. Zoltan and Johnny were there sawing fretwork. When Mr. Zoltan saw me, he got down on his knees. When Johnny saw that, he did too. They begged me to let them use their truck again. If they had their truck, they could go to the dump and find things for me, and buy nails and shingles whenever they needed them, and bring them back here in their truck. It was hard for me to understand everything they said, Danny, because Mr. Zoltan's English is not even as good as Mr. Chen's (at the Post Office). And Johnny would not look at me, or talk very loud either. But that was what they wanted, and when I understood I said of course they could use their truck, go right ahead.

They started thanking me then, over and over, and crying. And while they were doing that, we heard a funny noise from the direction of my house. I did not know what it was. You will think it silly of me, Danny, I know. But I did not. Mr. Zoltan and Johnny knew at once and ran toward it. I worried for a minute that someone might come and take the saws and hammers and things they were leaving behind. And I thought, they are not my things, and Johnny and Mr. Zoltan ran right off and left them so why should not I? No one asked me to watch them while they were gone.

By that time even Mr. Zoltan was out of sight. Johnny was out of sight almost before he began to run, because Johnny can run very fast. I did not run. I walked, but I walked fast, carrying Pusson and petting him as I went along. He is very nice for a black cat, Danny, about as nice as any cat that is not calico can be.

When I got back to my big house, Mr. Zoltan's trailer was still there, but Mr. Zoltan's truck was gone. That was when I knew what the noise we heard had been. It was the noise of the engine starting. Mr. Zoltan and

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Johnny had heard it many times, so they knew what it was. I had not, so I did not know.

Marmar said Suzette (Yvonne) had taken it. She thought she had run away. I said I did not think so, because I think that she needed to visit her little store, and that if Johnny telephoned her there in a few minutes she would be there. Johnny did not think so. Marmar said we would never see her again and little Ivy cried. Zoltan said I could get her back, but he would not say how.

After that, I decided to telephone myself, but I did not tell them that because I did not want them to think I was interfering.

That was when Mr. Swierzbowski came to talk about plumbing for my new little stranger. I made Mr. Zoltan and Johnny go back to it with us, so they could show Mr. Swierzbowski what needed to be done. There were some trees that would have to be cut for the septic tank, and a lot more that would have to be cut so Mr. Swierzbowski could bring in his big digging machine. I do not like trees being cut, so I said Mr. Zoltan and Johnny would dig it with shovels. They looked very despondent when I said this, so I said that if they would I would get their truck back or get them a new one. I said it because I do not think Suzette (Yvonne) has really run away and left her baby.

After that I came back here and Pusson and I called (phoned) Yvonne's store. There was no answer, so I am writing this letter to you instead. As soon I sign it and address your envelope and find a stamp for it, I will try again.

Hugs,
Your cousin Ivy

Dear Cousin Danny:

I have been so busy these past few days that I have not written. I am terribly sorry, but I have not even had a chance to go to the post office to buy Mr. Chen's stamps. Little Ivy is sleeping now. I think that she is more used to me, or perhaps I am more used to her. But she is sleeping like a little angel, with Pusson curled up beside her. I would take a picture if I could only find my camera, which is not in the kitchen cabinet or the library or anywhere.

But I have stopped trying to remember where my camera might be,

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and started trying to remember what I have told you and what happened after that letter was out in the big tin box, with the flag up. You know that Suzette (Yvonne) took Mr. Zoltan's truck. He is angry about it and so is Johnny. Suzette is not even Mr. Zoltan's daughter, only his daughter-in-law. I have talked to them, and Marmar is Mr. Zoltan's wife, just like I thought. Suzette (Yvonne) is Johnny's wife. But Johnny says was, and says he will beat her for a week. I do not see how he can beat her if he is going to divorce her. He says he will go to the king and get a divorce. Do you think he means George III, Danny? George III is dead, but then you are dead too, so perhaps George III can still divorce people. Johnny is Mr. Zoltan's son, and Marmar's.

It is funny, sometimes, how these things work out. When I had called Suzette's (Yvonne's) store several times and gotten no answer, and talked to Marmar besides Mr. Zoltan and Johnny, and called the store twice more, I felt sure that Suzette had stolen Mr. Zoltan's truck and was not ever going to bring it back.

So she had really stolen my truck because I had promised Mr. Zoltan and Johnny that I would get them a new one if we could not get their old one back. Besides, their trailer was parked in my front yard, and it still is. I like them and they have never asked to use my bathroom, not even once. But I do not want them living in my front yard until I am old and gray, which is now.

So I called the police. I described my truck to the nice policeman, and when he asked about license plates I said it did not have any because I had noticed that before Suzette took it. I said it had just been parked on my property but I had gotten two men to work on it, and as soon as it would run Suzette had run off with it. You can see that I told the nice policeman nothing but the truth, Danny. All that was just as true as I could make it without getting all complicated. I spoke clearly and enunciated plainly, and the nice policeman never argued with me about a thing.

Then he asked me about Suzette. I told him how old she was, and pretty, and black hair. And I explained that she was the wife of one of the men who had been working on my truck and building a new little house for me. That was fine too, Danny, and perhaps I ought to have left it at that, but I did not, and that seemed like it might be a mistake for a while. I told him that her professional name was Yvonne. Which it was.

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He became very interested and asked about her store, so I told him where it was and that I had never gone in there to buy anything. He said that there was a Mr. Bunco who would want to hear about Yvonne. I said Mr. Bunco could come out and talk to me anytime and I would tell him all I could, and I told him where I live.

After that I fixed dinner, which was macaroni-and-cheese and salad from my garden with canned salmon in it for me, and more salmon for Pusson. It was very good, too.

Pusson had only just finished saying thank you when we heard a police car. I went outside because I thought I ought to show the policemen where the truck had been, and I was just in time to see Mr. Zoltan and Marmar running into the woods. Johnny was gone already. I know he can run much faster. Little Ivy was crying, so I went into their trailer and picked her up. I rocked her, and she quieted down right away. She is such a good baby, Danny. You would never believe how good she is.

I told the lady who came with the policeman that I had been expecting Mr. Bunco. And she said she was Miz Bunco and that would have to do. But she gave me her card, and she was only fooling. Her name is really Sergeant Lois B. Anderson, unless it was someone else's card. She asked about little Ivy, and I explained that I was taking care of her while Suzette (Yvonne) was away stealing my truck. She said she would tell D.C. and F.S. and they would take her off my hands. I do not know who F.S. is, Danny, but D.C. is the District of Columbia which means the president. He looks like a very nice man, I know. Still, Danny, he is very busy and may not know how to take care of children. So I said that I did not want little Ivy taken off my hands, that I like her and she likes me, which is the truth. Then Miz Anderson said we ought to go inside where I could sit down, and perhaps little Ivy's diaper needed changing.

Miz Anderson held her while I put water on for tea and we had a nice talk. She said the president would put little Ivy in a faster home, and that might not be the best thing for her. Some faster homes were nice and some not so nice, she said. I did not like the idea of little Ivy living in another trailer, and it seems to me that one that went fast would be worse than Mr. Zoltan's, which does not move at all but is terribly crowded and smelly. So I said why not just let me keep her, she will be right here and perhaps Suzette will come back?

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Miz Anderson and I agreed that might be better, and Miz Anderson took her card and wrote call at once if Yvonne returns for baby on the back of it.

So little Ivy is mine now, Danny. Another little stranger is what I said to Pusson, who is a little stranger himself and delighted. I have told Marmar that I have to keep her until Suzette (Yvonne) comes back for her. I do not think Marmar likes that very much, but Mr. Zoltan and Johnny are on my side.

Hugs,
Your cousin Ivy

Dear Cousin Danny:

It has been days and days since I wrote last. I have been so busy! My little house is finished now, and some nice children came to see me today. Their names are Hank and Greta, isn't that nice? They are *twins*, and their mother loves old movies. They are ever so cute, and we had a wonderful time together. They have promised to come back and see me again. I made them promise that before they left, Danny, and they did. I am so looking forward to it.

So that is what I wanted to write you about. But I should have written before, because I have ever so much wonderful news. My little house is finished! Isn't that nice? And little Ivy is still with me, which is even nicer. I will give my little stranger back to her mother, of course, if her mother (Suzette) ever comes back. I suppose I'll have to, but I won't like it.

I call her the little stranger, and then I have to remind myself there are really three. That is little Ivy, Pusson, and the first little stranger ever, my new little house. But, Cousin Danny, there are *five* now, because I must include Hank and Greta, who are such sweet little strangers. I could just eat them up!

After Ivy got settled down for her nap this morning, I went to my new little house (it has a name now and I will tell you in a minute) to see if the nice lady from the department store had brought my new furniture yet. And out in front of my new little house were the sweetest children you ever saw, little towheads about seven or eight. I said hello and they said hello, and I asked their names, and they wanted to know if my little house was made of gingerbread.

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I explained that there was a lot of gingerbread on it, because that is what you call the lovely old-fashioned woodwork Mr. Zoltan and Johnny made for me. Danny, I had to hold each of them up so they could feel it and see it was not the kind of gingerbread you eat! Can you imagine?

After that we went inside, and I told them all about the nice big Navigator car you got for me from Mr. Cherigate, the building inspector. How hard it was to get him to stand up, and how I promised I would stop the bleeding and walk him out of my cute little Gingerbread House and never tell anyone what happened if he would give me his car for Mr. Zoltan. But I am not breaking my promise by talking about it to you in this letter, because you know already. He was so startled when you and that Hopkins girl joined us that he ran into the pantry and bumped his nose on a shelf trying to get out, remember? I still laugh when I think of it, but it was not really funny at all until I made it stop bleeding. Anyway Mr. Caminiti has come and fixed what he had put in wrong, and there are lights, ever so pretty when they shine out through all the trees.

But I just told Hank and Greta that a nice man had given me a big black car for what I did, bigger than Mr. Zoltan's truck had been. And I had given it to Mr. Zoltan and Johnny for building my house. It was too big for me anyway, and I have my own car. I do not think I could ever drive a big thing like that.

Hank and Greta liked my new little house so much that I have decided to call it Gingerbread House. Now I will never forget them, and I will find somebody to paint a sign saying that and put it on my little house, too.

But I was worried about little Ivy. I do not like to leave her alone for a long time, and the time was getting long. So I made Hank and Greta come back with me to this big house. I showed them little Ivy, and I showed them to little Ivy, too! She liked them and laughed and made all sorts of baby noises. Pusson told me her diaper needed changing, and Greta changed while Hank and I helped. After that, we baked gingerbread men and played with little Ivy, and played checkers with our gingerbread men, too, breaking off heads and things to make them fit on the squares. You could eat the cookies you captured, but if you did you could not use them to crown your kings. Hank ate all his, so Greta beat him. I did too. By that time it was getting dark, so I showed them how I could make fire fly out of Pusson's fur.

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Then we went back to Gingerbread House, and Miz Macy had brought the furniture and set it up like she promised, just like magic. The children were amazed and ever so pleased. Hank wanted to know if they could come back on Halloween, and Greta said no, she will be busy then.

So I said I hoped I would be very busy with little trick-or-treaters, but I would save special treats for them. Children never come, Danny, but I did not want Greta to feel badly. So perhaps she and Hank will come then. I hope so. Oh, I do! It has been ever so long since the children came here.

Hugs,

Your cousin Ivy

P.S. Brenda called while I was looking for your envelope. Hank and Greta are hers! And they had come home very late, she said, full of stories about baking cookies with a witch in the woods. Sally Cusick gave her my number and told her I might know something since I lived out this way. Of course I said my goodness there are no witches out here.

Only me.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

The calendar says that 2004 is the year of the monkey, but around here, it sure looks like the year of the dog. Paolo Bacigalupi found one in the ruins of the future, Alex Irvine solved a mystery thanks to a ghost borzoi, Bradley Denton took us inside the mind of an enlisted labradoodle, and next month we'll meet the smartest of 'em all, an Afghan hound who's determined to sniff out "The Bad Hamburger" in the story of the same name by Matthew Jarpe and Jonathan Andrew Sheen.

We've also been saving for you a little holiday present — 'tis the season, and all that. This year's gift comes to you from Michael Libling, whose "Christmas in the Catskills" might just make you check all the locks on the doors twice.

The other holiday gifts aren't all wrapped just yet, but we do expect to have the results from our latest contest next month, and soon we'll be bringing you new stories by Paul Di Filippo, Elizabeth Hand, Bruce Sterling, and Matthew Hughes. If you want to share the joy this season, remember that a subscription to *F&SF* is a great gift for the holidays that will be enjoyed throughout the year.

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Richard Chwedyk introduced us to the amiable saurs in our January 2001 issue and followed it with "Bronte's Egg" in our August 2002 issue. You need not have read either of the two previous stories to enjoy this one, but if you have read them, well, you're probably going to ignore these header notes and rush right into the story anyway, so let's not even finish this thought. Lower the drawbridge and enter Tibor's castle...and behold what lies within!

In Tibor's Cardboard Castle

By Richard Chwedyk

TIBOR STEPPED OUT OF HIS cardboard box and walked to the edge of the desk.

"Tibor's universe!" he declared, as if he had recently been challenged on this point.

The desk on which the box sat was right up against the window in the second floor "workroom" of the old neo-Victorian house where the saurs lived. There were two other desks in the room: one in the corner near the door, where Preston worked at his keyboard and display screen; the other was directly across the room from Tibor's — Geraldine's desk, on which *her* cardboard box sat, her "lab."

Tibor spoke as if making a general proclamation, but he stared straight at Geraldine's lab.

"Tibor's universe!" — more as if claiming authorship than ownership.

Across the room, through the little doorway cut from the cardboard, one could see lights flickering and shivering like a miniature thunderstorm inside Geraldine's lab — until Tibor spoke. The lights stopped.

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Geraldine stuck her head out, smiling as if pleased with a very private joke — a joke that was on everyone else.

She walked slowly but directly to the edge of her desk.

"My universe," she said in a voice that was, as usual, barely audible: that made you doubt you'd heard it at all, except that you heard it so clearly. Her reply was confident, and it was more than a challenge: it was a gauntlet.

"Tibor's universe," Tibor replied firmly. It was his custom to refer to himself only in the third person — and he insisted on pronouncing the first syllable to rhyme with "eye" and the second to rhyme with "saur." No force of logic or dictionary citation could convince him otherwise.

They stood there, at the edges of their desks, as if the room was a valley between them. They were both about the same size, which was small — designed to look like the great apatosaurs of the Jurassic Era (in a cartoonish sort of way, and their tails, alas, were short and stumpy), but each could just about fit in your open hand, from the heel of your palm to the end of your fingers.

Geraldine waited until Tibor looked ready to rear back in a moment of triumph.

And then she said: "Geraldine's universe."

Tibor scowled at Geraldine — but he always scowled. His brows were permanently knit. He inhaled as if the force of his breath would strengthen the force of his words.

"Tibor's universe!"

His voice was a little louder than Geraldine's, but not by much. Not only did it have that same diffuse quality, but a certain tinniness too, a slightly artificial edge, as if he had taken elocution lessons from a voice synthesizer.

Geraldine paused a little longer, like an orchestra conductor exaggerating the rest before a coda.

"Geraldine's" — without change in pitch or volume.

A brief but distinctly visible shudder ran through Tibor.

"Tibor's!"

His name hung in the space between the desks like a tiny puff of smoke with an exclamation point attached to it —

— Until it was answered by "Geraldine's," — and the little puff disintegrated.

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"Tibor's!"

"Geraldine's."

"*Tibor's!*"

"Geraldine's."

As much as they argued over it, the universe seemed very far away from them — it might as well have been an errant checker that had fallen off the board and rolled into a corner.

But if the universe was far away, it was not quite out of earshot.

Preston, on the corner desk, sighed at the distraction. The dark green theropod, who had a somewhat rounder and larger head than most tyrannosaurs, was for once not working on one of his novels, but reading over a list of questions submitted to him by a graduate student. This graduate student wanted to know about his life, his influences, his writing habits and his "personal philosophy."

That last part was the most troublesome. He knew the answers to the other questions, though he wasn't sure he was ready to share them. What would happen if his readers knew that the eight novels written by "Ellis Lawrence Cartwright" were the work of a tyrannosaurid no more than half a meter tall who was manufactured in the factory/lab of a toy company? Who now lived in an old house out past the sprawl of a great megalopolis with a hundred-odd other "saurs"? By rights, he shouldn't exist at all, much less have written eight novels.

But that last question: his "philosophy." He had one, certainly, but he couldn't say what it was.

And the duel going on between Tibor and Geraldine wouldn't bring him any closer to an answer.

On the floor, in the center of the room, Agnes watched over everyone and everything. She was a gray stegosaurus, about forty centimeters long, and if the universe was created by Tibor, or Geraldine, or "some other idiot" (as she would have put it), Agnes was its guardian and its judge, self-appointed.

And, hearing the exchange between Geraldine and Tibor, she was not pleased.

"They do it to annoy me," she muttered to her mate, Sluggo, a slightly smaller gray stegosaur who stood next to her. "*Just* to annoy me!"

"Agnes?" Sluggo spoke apprehensively. It had been his job for years

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to calm his mate and reassure her, and it never deterred him that at this one job he had consistently failed. "I don't think they even know you're here."

She narrowed her gaze as she stared up at them. "*They* know! They know damn well who's here!"

A small hadrosaur named Ace rode around the room on a shoe-sized, battery-powered contraption called a "skate," which many of the little ones used to get around what was for them a leviathan of a house.

"Hey!" Agnes called to him. "Slow that thing down! You might hurt someone!"

Ace pretended not to hear her and skated one more circuit of the room before rolling out the door.

He also pretended not to hear the battle between Geraldine and Tibor above him.

To Agnes's right, a short, somewhat owlish theropod with a downturned snout named Alphonse had gathered an audience: the triceratops couple, Charlie and Rosie, and two other stegosaurs named Elliot and Veronica. Alphonse listened to a tiny digital radio with a pocket phone at the ready, waiting for the ImpacNewzRadio Daily Trivia Question. If he could answer today's question correctly he would set a new record. He was not interested in an argument that consisted almost entirely of the possessives of two proper names.

But Charlie looked up at Tibor, who from that angle was backlit by the early summer afternoon sunlight — a silhouette, tiny and severe.

"When do you think they'll stop?" he whispered to Rosie.

"Geraldine," Rosie whispered back, "will stop *him*."

In general, the other saurs tried, *really* tried, not to pay any attention to Geraldine and Tibor, or anything that happened on those two desks, with their cardboard boxes.

It had been so since they first arrived. Before he was brought to the house, Tibor arrived at an Atherton Foundation office in a cat carrier with several other saurs, in the custody of a bewildered, flustered woman who found them scrabbling with squirrels and robins for the contents of her feeder. Tibor wore a little green plastic "something" on his head — it could have been a very large, rimmed thimble, if such a thing existed, or a doll-house-sized flower pot — he called it "Tibor's hat"; and he had a tiny children's picture book: *I Am a Big Dinosaur* — "Tibor's book."

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Geraldine, on the other hand, was brought right up to the doorstep in the middle of the night — like a foundling or a terrorist's bomb — by someone who managed to elude detection by the Reggiesystem security protocols. That "someone" also left a note, written in a very shaky hand: GERALDINE. PLEASE BE CAREFUL.

That was as much as anyone knew about them previous to their arrival at the house.

Tibor's cardboard box was big, like the ones used to ship large electronic devices. It was hard to say what it had originally contained: all the printing and manufacturer's logos on the box had been scribbled out and replaced with a terse, angry scrawl of a name —

TIBOR!

PROPERTY OF TIBOR!

KEEP OUT! TIBOR'S!

Above the little cut-out doorway, printed in much smaller, but still adamant, lettering: TIBOR'S CASTLE.

In truth, it looked nothing like a castle. It had no battlements, no towers, no walls, no moat. No effort had been made even to draw those elements on the surface and make it seem more castle-like by some *trompe l'oeil* effect. But the other saurs thought of it as a castle and nothing else.

That point was established one night when the saurs — big and small — were gathered in front of the video in the parlor, watching one of the artifacts of the former century: a movie called *Citizen Kane*, considered quite a masterpiece in its time. As they watched the beginning, with its image of the shadowy castle on the hilltop of the Xanadu estate, all behind the ominous NO TRESPASSING sign on the wrought iron fence, Symphony Syd — a stegosaur not prone to exclamations, or even whispers — squeaked out in recognition, "Tibor!"

The other saurs understood perfectly. Not for any physical resemblance, but when they looked up at Tibor's "castle," very often with Tibor glaring down at them, they couldn't help but feel — *Xanadu!*

Tibor did not really frighten them. He was a runt when you came down to it. His Beethovian scowl was more likely to inspire laughter or unease, but never fear.

He *could* worry them, though. He could even worry the human, Tom

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Groverton, who also lived in the house and took care of the saurs. Dr. Margaret Pagliotti, the human who came every week to check on their health, might also worry over Tibor, when he stood in his castle entrance, staring up at her and declaring, "Tibor chooses not!" at the prospect of a bath (a bath which he received all the same).

Tom once described the feeling as knowing that a carbonated pop bottle had been shaken vigorously then put back in with the other bottles, so you no longer knew which bottle was going to spray you when you opened it.

Tibor, of course, seemed to interpret their expressions otherwise. As much as anyone could guess at the workings of the mind of Tibor, where others saw worry, or frustration, or even amusement, Tibor saw awe, and reverence, and deference.

In Tibor's reckoning (to the extent that he declared it), *he* was the unrecognized, misunderstood genius. Tibor the thinker. Tibor the bold leader. The aesthetic innovator. The brilliant strategist. Tibor: lonesome, rejected outcast, embittered, unbroken!

The saurs tried not to reckon him at all. Not because they didn't like him, but when they did, he recruited them into the Great Tiborian Army, the Tiborian Council or, when he felt especially generous, into the Knights of Tibor.

Or he would often try to appropriate anything he desired from the other saurs by boldly walking up to them and claiming possession of it: "Tibor's corn!" "Tibor's ribbon!" Or, if he desired possession emphatically: "Tibor's *imperial* skate!"

"Tibor's universe!" — insistent, like a fiery pianist whose every finger hammered the same, single note.

Alphonse pressed closer to the radio, and its news of wars and fires and airline crashes in Kentucky and downturns in the stock market.

Preston closed his eyes. The sentence he had been forming in reply to the graduate student shrank into one word: "Patience."

Geraldine paused just long enough to move Tibor from the simmer to the boil.

"Geraldine's."

"*Tibor's!*"

Geraldine smiled, as usual, to herself.

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The box behind her also had all its markings crossed out, but there was only one word that replaced all the writing and logos. One word — DANGER!

All it took to brighten her smile was to look at that word. Neatly drawn beneath it were a saurian skull and a pair of crossed femurs.

There was another old film that evinced from the saurs a degree of recognition when they viewed it: *The Bride of Frankenstein.*

It was Kincaid, a squirrel-sized bright yellow corythosaur, who whispered the name "Geraldine" upon seeing the mad doctor's laboratory with all its strange devices. The screen flickered with lightning and thunder rumbled from the speakers, sending the saurs into shudders, as thunderstorms — or the name Geraldine — always did.

They knew somehow that — as they trembled down in the parlor, watching this frightening tableau — Geraldine was up on the second floor, in her lab, smiling.

Tom Groverton kept two fire extinguishers in the workroom, close to Geraldine's lab, which seemed a sensible precaution.

In the medieval days of humans, children were born of whom it was said that "their eyes were too bright" and that they bore "a look too uncanny." They were considered "devil's children," not really human at all, and they were often killed or banished to save the village from destruction and damnation.

Those were days of superstition and barbarism. The new century was, at least ostensibly, an age of reason and pragmatism. No one wished to harm Geraldine, or at least no one would admit to it.

If Tibor might make one feel uneasy on occasion, Geraldine could bring on waves of anxieties within an instant by doing nothing more than looking and smiling.

Downstairs in the parlor, at that very moment, Tyrone and Alfie, two inseparable little theropods, were telling Doc that Alfie saw Geraldine floating in the air once.

Doc was a beige tyrannosaur, about fifty centimeters tall when he stood up straight — which was difficult, since he had a "tricky" left leg. His thick brows made it look as if he were always squinting, though you could just make out a twinkle in his eyes as he smiled at the little ones.

"A dream, no doubt," Doc told them. "I've dreamt of Geraldine

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myself — a dream where I'm running for my life, faster than I've ever — "

Alfie shook his head. He never spoke except to whisper into Tyrone's ear.

"Alfie says it wasn't a dream. Everyone was still at breakfast, and he came back to the workroom. Geraldine was *floating*."

"Well." Doc looked at Alfie. "I did see once on the video a story about a new kind of resin or plastic — clear as glass — that rides on the static electricity in the air like a kite rides on the breezes. Very popular with the children. Perhaps Geraldine's acquired a small piece of that substance, and you saw her riding on that."

Alfie, himself no bigger than Tibor or Geraldine, looked up at Doc with his perfectly round, dark eyes, then whispered some more into Tyrone's ear.

"Alfie says she wasn't riding. She was *floating*."

Doc leaned forward and gently placed his forepaw on Alfie's head. "Perhaps. Anything within reason is possible." He looked over at the other saurs in the parlor, engaged in a game called Not So Hard, using their tails to flick checkers like little hockey pucks across the wooden floor.

"Or *without* reason, I suppose."

Back upstairs, Tibor hammered away while Geraldine lengthened her pauses to frustrate her opponent further.

"*Tibor's!*"

"Geraldine's."

"It's torture!" Agnes groaned. Her back plates rose up straight and clicked together in her agitation. "They're *torturing* us!"

"Agnes, please," said Sluggo.

Preston's reply to the graduate student evaporated into "Patience" for the third time.

Alphonse turned up the volume on his little radio. His companions tried not to look up at either desk.

But there were two other saurs in the room whose attention was fixed on the duel above. Their heads moved as they shifted their attention from one apatosaur to the other — as if they were watching a tennis match.

One of them was Axel, a blue theropod who stood about thirty centimeters tall when he craned his neck. He had a long scar down his back — healed for many years but still visible. His eyes were opened wide

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and he let his jaw drop down so that the pink insides of his mouth and all his thorny white teeth were visible.

He was fascinated with the exchange between Geraldine and Tibor, though he had no idea what provoked it or what it was about — maybe *because* he had no idea. It was the energy that fascinated him, the activity. It was like watching the humans who brought the food supplies every week: they went to the back of the truck and unloaded another box, and then another, and then another. The momentary idea that the action could be repeated into infinity was intoxicating and almost addictive. No matter whose universe it was, it threatened to become nothing more than these two names, Geraldine and Tibor, bouncing back and forth forever. To Axel, the possibility was horrifying, and for that reason it was also hypnotic. And exhilarating.

Next to Axel stood a small pink apatosaur — smaller even than Geraldine or Tibor. Her name was Guinevere. That was not the first thing she was called, but it was what she was called now.

The first thing she was called (by Axel, it so happened) was "Gack!" because that was the first sound she made when she hatched from her egg. It was a momentous occasion — all the saurs were watching when she emerged. No saur in the house had ever been born from an egg before — or even "born" in any other imaginable way. No one even knew it was possible until it happened.

Bronte, a dark green cat-sized apatosaur, was the mother and she decided (with a little help from Agnes) that "Gack!" was not an appropriate name for such a special creature.

Axel's second choice for a name was Lancelot, since Lancelot had been his buddy many years before, and Axel had been thinking about him a lot just then. But that name was voted down too — as it seemed to all the assembled saurs that the hatchling belonged to another gender (*how* they could tell her gender was not discussed).

The name Guinevere was suggested by Hetman, a blind, limbless theropod so crippled he was confined to a little bed that had been wheeled over to the hatching so that, unable to see it, he could listen to the event.

Bronte liked the name. "Guinevere," she said, sounding it out for herself. "She is Guinevere."

Time confirmed the appropriateness of Hetman's choice. Guinevere

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was treated like a princess, especially by her mother. Great things were expected of her: a saur who had been born, in a sense, not manufactured. A saur who had never had to suffer the indignities of being purchased, treated like a toy, and often abused. She was a creature free of the saurs' past. Guinevere was the future.

And Axel formed a special relationship with her. Axel helped bring her into the world when he "invented" the robot Rotomotoman, a metal cylinder capped with a hemisphere that held two rolling eyes the size of tea saucers, and duly equipped with arm-like appendages and four small wheels. He (Rotomotoman was rarely referred to as "it") stood in a corner of the workroom, attentive, and for the moment facing Geraldine and Tibor. The names "Geraldine" and "Tibor" flipped back and forth almost casually on the display screen in his cylinder-chest.

Rotomotoman was the product of sheer creative will on Axel's part — and a great deal of assistance from Axel's fellow saurs (and the Reggiesystem computer that so greatly aided in the operation of the house). He had dreamed of Rotomotoman and wouldn't rest until Rotomotoman had been built. Only after Rotomotoman's eyes lighted with a kind of mechanical consciousness, and he had rolled along the floor of the house on his four little wheels, was it discovered that he also possessed a little drawer secreted in his cylindrical torso — an incubator, perfect for saurian eggs.

The first egg ever placed in the drawer was Bronte's, and from that egg Guinevere emerged. Axel, therefore, could consider himself as a kind of uncle, or godfather.

He thought of himself as Guinevere's "buddy."

Bronte often spent the afternoons reading to Hetman in the library. Sometimes Guinevere stayed with her. At other times Guinevere went off with Axel — which Bronte allowed with a little worry and only if Agnes stayed nearby.

Axel wanted to show the world to Guinevere: the world he knew and the world he imagined he knew, which was much bigger than the old house. What troubled Bronte about this arrangement was that Axel found it difficult to get his facts together coherently, if he resorted to facts at all.

"The first thing the world did was blow up," Axel told Guinevere. "That's called the Big Bang! Everything flew out of the Big Bang and it's

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been flying around ever since! You look outside at night and see all those stars and planets and moons? That's all Big Bang stuff still out there! And it's all *moving*! It don't look like it's moving but that's because it's all moving *away* from us and getting smaller and it's like millions of years away. We can't see how it's moving because time moves slower the farther it is from us! See?"

Axel was also subject to extended, energetic reveries for which his imagination was the only boundary.

"Did you know that there are *space guys* out there? Like some of those little stars are really *big* stars, like the Sun, but they're *far* away! And those stars have got planets too! And the planets have got *space guys* who fly around in interstellar *ships* and talk to each other and float around because they don't have any gravity! Did I tell you about gravity yet?"

Not that Agnes made any close acquaintance with facts either, but where Axel's imaginative improvisations were light — light enough at times to float up to the ceiling — Agnes's were heavy and drew one back down to the floor.

About humans Agnes would say, "Idiots! Cruel, selfish idiots! Even the ones who seem nice — keep an eye on them! You never know when they might turn on you!" Or she would say, "Brain size! What good is having a big, fat, bulging brain if you don't know how to use it?"

Agnes might best be described as a realist unburdened by facts, and Axel as a creature unburdened by realism.

Between the two Bronte hoped, apprehensively, to sort out for Guinevere some picture of the world as it really was.

As for Guinevere, it was hard for anyone to say what she thought, for she was still very young. She was attentive and curious, and showed signs of understanding most everything that was said to her.

But what she made of it no one could say, because she had so far not uttered a word. A few, not the least of them Bronte, worried that she might not be able to speak at all.

Bronte was a worrier, like many new mothers, and though it was pointed out to her by her friend Kara — a rust-colored apatosaur the same size and shape of Bronte (but with a longer, somewhat impudent snout) — that many saurs spent a long time listening before trying to speak, she couldn't help herself.

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There were other saurs, of course, who having once started to speak, couldn't stop.

"Tibor's!"

"Geraldine's."

"*Tibor's!*"

"Geraldine's."

"TIBOR'S!"

"Stop it, you two!" Agnes shouted.

Nothing subliminal in Agnes's deep voice: you heard her clearly, unquestionably, even if you were on the other side of the house.

"I don't want to hear *another* word out of either of you!"

"Don't listen," said Geraldine.

With Geraldine distracted, Tibor took the opportunity to repeat, "Tibor's! Tibor's! Tibor's!" — as if by saying it more often he could win the debate.

"Hey! You want trouble?" Agnes raised her tail and arched her back until her plates clicked like castanets.

"Yes — " Geraldine said it in a way that sounded both like a question and an answer.

Axel and Guinevere turned around to watch, as if a new player had been introduced to the game.

"We *don't* want trouble," Sluggo called up to Geraldine. "But maybe you could settle your argument some other way."

"Tibor's! Tibor's! Tibor's!"

Geraldine smiled down at them. Agnes fiercely returned the regard. Sluggo pressed himself closer to Agnes. Charlie and Rosie shuddered. Elliot and Veronica turned away. Alphonse whispered, in a sort of chant, "Ask the question. Ask the question. Ask the question."

Preston, with his keyboard resting on his outstretched legs — an awkward-looking but comfortable posture for him — started to write with the four digits of his small forepaws: "Dear Jeanne, Thank you for your interest in my work. I'm not sure if I can tell you anything very interesting or revealing about what I do. The books have to speak for themselves — "

Guinevere looked up at Geraldine and shook her head.

Geraldine looked down at Guinevere and nodded approvingly.

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Guinevere had reason to shake her head often in the few brief months of her existence. She shook her head at the explanations of how the saurs came to be in such a place: how as toys they were not treated very well, and when they acted in ways that their manufacturers hadn't anticipated, they were treated even worse. Of the thousands that had been sold, most were destroyed or abandoned. Only through the intercession of the Atherton Foundation were the few hundred surviving saurs given places to live, refuges where they were fed and cared for — places like the house where they lived now. Guinevere shook her head quite often with those stories.

She shook her head at Agnes's explanations for the behavior of the humans, the ones who made them and humans in general.

She shook her head as she watched the other saurs in the house: playing, being read to, taking messages and lessons from the Reggiesystem computer; watching the video or — like the Five Wise Buddhasaurs, who didn't look wise at all — blowing into small, plastic musical instruments, looking at each other and chuckling in their high, croaking voices ("Ho-ho," "Hee-hee," "Hah-hah," in almost fiendish tones), then blowing even harder.

But she never spoke a word. Agnes said that it was because Axel never gave her a chance, but Kara said that when Guinevere was ready to speak, she would.

A wealth of questions followed Kara's assertion. *Could* Guinevere speak? *Would* she? And *when*?

The other saurs not only wanted to know, they *needed* to know: already, two more eggs were sitting in Rotomotoman's incubator, one of Kara's and one of Agnes's. Could they expect the egg-born saurs to have the same capabilities as the ones that came from lab/factories?

Or maybe more?

Guinevere was the future.

But, for the time being, the future had to be kept a secret.

At that very moment, Tom Groverton was in his office a few doors down from the workroom, on the phone with Susan Leahy, the head of the Atherton Foundation, about the strange van that had been parked in the woods near the house. Security system cameras had picked it up several times in the past week. Tom had seen the van himself, with its forestry

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service logo on the side, but the Reggiesystem confirmed that no such service existed.

"We can't hide Guinevere forever," Susan said to Tom.

"Or the others, when they hatch." Tom looked out his window, as if he might catch a glimpse of the van again.

"Or the others."

"So who are these people with the van?"

"No one from the Office of Bioengineering," Susan said. "That much we're sure of. The SANI Corporation owns Toyco, and they've just merged with a company called Biomatia that just received a big defense contract. They've been petitioning us pretty strongly for 'research privileges.'"

"They want their saurs back," Tom said.

"They won't succeed, Tom. We need time, but we'll work something out. You'll need to be extra watchful, but I know you can handle it."

Tom Groverton, as he usually did when someone tried to display confidence in him, changed the subject.

"The other day I was going through some music files in a public database. I found some things by a twentieth-century musician and composer named Ornette Coleman. I don't know if it's just me, but it sounds just like the Five Wise Buddhasaurs!"

Susan laughed. Tom didn't know enough about music to understand why, but he laughed along with her.

He said goodbye and went outside — just for a few minutes — to inspect the security system and to see if he could once more catch a glimpse of the suspicious van.

Before stepping out he stopped by Doc, who was sitting on a little plastic cube he kept that served as a stool. He was the unofficial referee of the Not So Hard game.

"I'll just be a minute," Tom said. "Keep an eye on things."

Doc raised a forepaw in what would have been a salute had his forepaws been longer.

"Worry not," Doc said. "The world is well and in its proper order."

In the workroom, Geraldine and Tibor were still faced off, Geraldine still smiling, Tibor still scowling back.

But for the moment — silence.

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Blessed silence. Except for the sound of the radio and Preston typing energetically.

"There is no grand scheme to my writing," Preston tapped away at the keyboard. "I listen to music. The music suggests stories to me, the way that clouds suggest images and shapes. Shostakovich for some. Mahler for others. And every now and then I dabble in Bruckner."

"After these messages," Alphonse heard from the radio, "we'll be giving today's trivia question!"

Agnes lowered her tail and cautiously unclenched her teeth.

Geraldine kept smiling, as if testing the light breeze that came through the window behind Tibor's castle, or staring through that window at something far off — *or*, as if waiting for the proper moment to say —

"Geraldine's."

"Tibor's!"

"That does it!" Agnes thumped her tail against the floor. "Axel! Get those plastic stairs over there and put them up by her desk!"

The plastic stairs were an adjustable device used by the saurs to get up on tables, chairs, couches and the like. They were set on casters so that they could be moved easily from one place to another, and a few presses of a lever reset the height and pitch of the stairs. Axel brought over the set of stairs currently placed up against Preston's desk.

"Hey!" said Charlie. "Now Preston can't get down!"

"We'll bring it back!" Agnes said. "This is important!"

Axel pushed the stairs over to Geraldine's desk.

Preston kept on, not even noticing. "I listened to many stories, and read many more. Something about their shape, their certainty, comforted me through some very hard times." He thought about taking out that last part. So far he had carefully avoided any reference to his life apart from his writing.

But why?

A wild notion occurred to him: How would it feel not to keep the secret? To tell this graduate student who he really was? It struck him like a story idea. He could already hear the narrative, in a storyteller's voice.

It drowned out all the other voices, even —

"Geraldine's."

"Tibor's! Tibor's! Tibor's!"

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"Don't make me come up there!" Agnes shouted.

"You *don't* want to go up there," Sluggo whispered to her, and added emphatically, "Geraldine!"

"Oh, shut up!" Agnes approached the plastic stairs. "This nonsense has to stop!"

"The universe doesn't belong to *either* of you!" Sluggo called up to Geraldine and Tibor. "It doesn't belong to *anyone!*"

"Geraldine's."

"Tibor's!"

"Don't waste your breath!" Agnes stopped at the foot of the stairs. "They're *insane*!"

"They're — they're just *playing*!" Sluggo hurried to her side. "They're only doing it for the attention."

Agnes scowled up at the two. "If they weren't doing it in front of *Guinevere*!"

"Hey! Guys!" Axel ran from one side of the plastic stairs to the other, right around Agnes and Sluggo. "Sluggo's right! It's like the Reggiesystem says: 'The universe is one big place!'"

"Not one," Tibor said. "Many."

"Many what?" Axel, forepaws resting on the plastic stairs, stared up at Tibor.

"Universes. Many. This one is Tibor's!"

"Geraldine's."

Axel's jaw opened wide. "Universes?" Still holding on to the plastic stairs, he stepped toward Tibor's desk.

"Many universes," Tibor said.

"Where you keep 'em?" He took another step.

"Come. Up here. Tibor will reveal all."

"Heyyyy!" Another step.

"Guinevere, you want to see Tibor's universes?" he asked. "Physics guys say you can make universes as small as a *pocket*. You know what a *pocket* is?"

Guinevere, hurrying along after Axel, looked up at Geraldine. Geraldine smiled down at her and nodded.

Agnes watched the plastic stairs scooting quickly away from her and shouted, "Hey! Put that back! Leave it! *Ne touchez pas!*"

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"Agnes!" Sluggo whispered. "Please!"

"Oh, shut up!" She followed after them with her tail raised.

"Axel! Guinevere!"

But Axel couldn't hear her. He was thinking: *Universes!* The stairs slapped abruptly against Tibor's desk. The desks were all about the same height, so Axel didn't need to adjust the steps.

"Don't go up there!" Agnes shouted. "And don't let *Guinevere* — "

But Guinevere had already shot past Axel and was halfway up the stairs.

"*Guinevere!*" Agnes gasped. "GUINEVERE! GET DOWN FROM THERE!"

"Hey! Guinevere! Wait!" Axel raced up after her.

Agnes followed, tail raised as she shouted, "*Stop* her, you idiot!"

Sluggo trailed behind, ducking back several times to avoid Agnes's tail.

Tibor stood in the small (Tibor-sized) doorway of his castle when Guinevere and Axel made it to the top of the desk. It was the only entrance — or exit.

Guinevere, on her tiny but very swift legs, slipped into the castle past Tibor.

"Hey! Guinevere! Maybe you should — " Axel stopped at the doorway: Tibor-sized, not Axel-sized.

"Heyyy! How do I get in?"

"Tibor's *sanctum sanctorum*." Tibor backed into his castle until he was completely within its cardboard walls.

Axel dropped down to his belly. He squeezed his head and forepaws through and could squeeze no further.

Agnes and Sluggo stood behind him. "Get her out of there!" Agnes shouted. "Get her *out of there*!"

"Guinevere! Hey! Guinevere!" Axel's vision slowly adjusted to the dark interior of the box. At first he could see nothing at all.

And then — the darkness filled with stars!

"Heyyyy!"

More stars than the clear nighttime sky. More stars than on the old screensaver of the Reggiesystem downstairs computer! There were stars and planets and galaxies and clouds of cosmic gases extending in every direction.

The universe expanded outward like a projection in a planetarium

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show, and Axel could see it all — stars being born, galaxies collapsing in their dotage. In the middle of it all "stood" Tibor and Guinevere, looking more like they were floating in space.

"Tibor's universe," Tibor said to Guinevere. "Behold!"

"It's neat!" Axel shouted. "You got any space guys in here too?"

"Very few life forms exist in this universe," Tibor said, looking at Guinevere but answering Axel's question. "Tibor had other universes, teeming with life."

"How many universes can you fit in here?"

"Sizes and scales are relative. All universes may fit in here, within scale. All time may fit in here."

Suddenly, the universe started moving backward, or inward, and everything Axel had seen moving away from him was now rapidly approaching, like a huge skyrocket in reverse, pulling back all its fire, fragments and filaments. The hundred billion stars seemed to be heading straight for Axel's head.

"AAAAAAAAA!" he screamed.

But the Big Crunch didn't crush him. It retreated to a spot in the center of the castle, where for an instant it looked like one fiercely brilliant star over Tibor's head, then extinguished.

"So it was. So it is. So it will be."

It sounded like something Axel heard in the space stories he watched on the video, like *Guardians of the Galaxy*; or the historical stories where the humans wore robes and sandals, and they walked around in big temples and pyramids.

Absent the universe, not much else seemed to be within Tibor's castle: a few luminous blue lozenges, which might have been pulled off the control panels of some technical equipment; a pocket-sized computer with its color screen repeating an image of an expanding sphere; a book-sized rectangular piece of clear material, like an old Plexiglas remnant; a few oddly shaped pieces of metal, bolts and washers possibly, arranged in two lines that met at a right angle to form a big letter T.

Some paper pictures were pinned to the cardboard walls. Axel recognized the portraits of Napoleon and Beethoven. The other faces he didn't know, but they all looked like Tibor, even one that had the hair and tusks of a warthog.

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"Eight hundred billion years ago," Tibor said, " — eight hundred billion years from now, Tibor and Geraldine played."

"Whatcha play?" Axel found any mention of play interesting.

An image filled one of the walls of Tibor's castle: projected. Not projected *on* the wall so much as *in front* of it. The image was of Tibor and Geraldine, sitting before a huge, dark space: like an aviation hangar or the interior of a cathedral. Each of them sat before their own small gray box, on which they each rested their forelegs.

And then Axel felt something smack hard against his back, just above his tail.

"Owwww! Hey!"

"What the hell's going on in there?" Agnes shouted. "Move it!"

WHEN ACE RETURNED to the workroom, still riding on his skate, he couldn't quite see what was happening atop Tibor's desk.

He saw the plastic stairs.

He saw Agnes's tail swinging.

He could hear Axel's shout, "I'M STUCK!" But muffled, as if his head was inside a cardboard box.

And from Alphonse's little radio, he heard an announcer: "And here's today's trivia question: Which major toy company once used the slogan, 'From our labs to your playrooms'?"

"Toyco!" Alphonse tapped the pre-programmed number on his pocket phone. "Toyco! Toyco! Toyco! It's — it's so *easy*!" he said to his gathered friends. He had a high voice and he shouted the syllables with such enthusiasm that it sounded more like the honking of one of the Buddhasaurs' plastic horns.

But Charlie, Rosie, Veronica, and Elliott didn't hear any of it. They were staring up at Tibor's castle.

Preston heard none of it either. He was staring at what he had just written: "I want to be forthcoming for once. You know I write under a pseudonym. My real name is Preston. Just Preston — no other name. The photograph that accompanies my novels is of the human who takes care of the house where I live. I am — " He hesitated, the digits of his forepaws raised over his keyboard before finishing the sentence " — a saur."

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Geraldine was not to be seen, but her lab was once again alive with flickerings and flashings and strange noises.

Ace U-turned his skate and rolled out of the workroom. He rode downstairs on the flatbed lift (originally designed to hold a wheelchair) that took the saurs from one floor to the other.

On the first floor he rode straight to the library, where Bronte was reading to Hetman, whose bed had been wheeled over to the window. Kara was with her, as were a number of other saurs who enjoyed listening to her read.

Bronte read from a book titled *Ulysses*. Diogenes, a shy tyrannosaur and the unofficial librarian of the house, had pulled it from one of the upper shelves. At a little over a meter tall, he was one of the few saurs who could reach it. He must have thought it was another account of the events that followed the Trojan War, since Hetman enjoyed the works of Homer and Virgil.

But as Bronte read about Buck Milligan, the shaving bowl and the lather, she stopped to say, "Maybe this is a 'modern' prologue. They *are* using a lot of Latin — "

When she got to the part with Stephen Dedalus in the classroom with the little boy, Sargent, doing over his sums, she said, "I'm sorry, Hetman. I thought this was another story. I'll have Diogenes find us another book."

"Keep going," Hetman said in his rough, deep voice. "I like this Stephen Dedalus — what he says about the little boy: 'Yet someone had loved him, borne him in her arms and in her heart. But for her the race of the world would have trampled him underfoot.' Please read on."

"Axel's head is stuck in the door of Tibor's castle!" said Ace.

"What!" The pages of *Ulysses* fluttered before Bronte like a fan.

Ace said, louder: "*Axel's head is stuck in the door of Tibor's Castle!*"

"Where's Guinevere?"

"Inside Tibor's Castle."

The copy of *Ulysses* slipped from Bronte's footstool-lectern and thudded to the floor.

"But Agnes — "

"She's hitting Axel with her tail," Ace said, "but he still can't get his head out."

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"As if that's going to help!" Kara looked upward. "We better get up there before Agnes flattens him!"

The little ones who'd gathered around for the reading started to chatter and whisper. The story circulated among them, from those who had heard to those who hadn't, inevitably altered along the way on a few slight details: "Agnes is *heating* Axel!" "Tibor's castle ate Guinevere!" "Somebody stole Axel's head!"

As quickly as the story spread the saurs made their way up to the workroom to see.

"Oh, Hetman, I'm sorry!" Bronte said, trying to close the book neatly on the floor as Kara waited. "I don't remember the page where — "

"The story can wait," Hetman replied. "You must go to your child."

"Thank you," said Bronte. "I'm so — "

"Don't worry," said Hetman. "I'm sure she'll be fine."

"Geraldine's lab," Ace told them, "is making a lot of noise." He turned his skate around and joined the crowd heading upstairs.

"Geraldine!" Hetman took a deep, wheezy, breath. "Hurry, Bronte!"

Bronte and Kara made their way quickly, but the lift was already too crowded. Every saur who wasn't already in the workroom was heading for it, with the exception of Diogenes, who stayed with Hetman, and the odd pair (one short, one tall) of green tyrannosaurs — Jean-Claude and Pierrot — who were captivated by a catalog from the Idaho Steak Ranch.

The game of Not So Hard was unofficially declared delayed on account of Axel's head being stuck in something.

Even the Five Wise Buddhasaurs put down their synthesized horns and hopped down from the couch.

Doc limped along on his tricky leg and called out to the other saurs, "My friends! My friends! Please clear the way for Bronte and Kara! Please!"

"Doc!" Kara called out from the clot of saurs heading up the stairs. "We'll need your help!"

"I'll be there as soon as I can!"

He lamented for once that the house didn't have a device larger than the skates — for which he was too big. Something along the lines of a scooter, perhaps, would be in order.

Hubert, a tyrannosaur of about the same height as Diogenes, noticed

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Doc's plight and held up the advance of a large spaniel-sized (but wider in girth) brown triceratops named Dr. David Norman. Hubert bent his legs, picked Doc up from just under his forepaws and gently placed him on Dr. Norman's back.

"Now," Hubert said in a whispery voice, "you can ride."

"My thanks." Doc held onto Dr. Norman's bony crest. "This is most — unconventional. I hope I don't prove too heavy."

Dr. Norman shook his head. "Better you than children." He started for the stairs and added, somewhat cryptically, "Or monkeys."

Hubert stayed alongside, a forepaw on Doc's back in case he slipped, and the three carefully but determinedly made their way through the throng of saurs heading upstairs.

UPSTAIRS, AGNES and Sluggo dropped onto their bellies, exhausted. They had shouldered (with as much shoulder as they had, which was very little) up against Axel, in an effort to push him out: an exercise which had about as much effect in extricating Axel's head from Tibor's castle as pressing their shoulders against a solid stone wall.

"Sluggo," Agnes said between deep gasps. "This isn't working. We're — we're — " She could hardly bring herself to say it. " — *quadrupeds*! We're not built for this!"

"I know," said Sluggo through shorter, faster gasps.

"Well, why didn't you say something?"

"I — I did."

"Oh, don't bother me with your complaining! Hey!" Agnes shouted to Rotomotoman, who had rolled over to the desk and stared at them with his enormous eyes.

For two simple plastic disks with simple-looking black pupils, Rotomotoman's eyes displayed a remarkable range of expression, finding every nuance between astonishment and bafflement.

But Agnes, so intent on scrutinizing others, was less adept at being scrutinized.

"Get back over there! You've got eggs in you! I'm not going to have you tipping over and killing my little one!"

From where she stood, Agnes couldn't read the words displayed on

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Rotomotoman's torso screen: WANT : TO : HELP — but it wouldn't have made a difference to her.

"Go on! Beat it! Everything's under control here!"

To the saurs crowded into the workroom, it must not have sounded very convincing.

Agnes stared down at them from the edge of the desk.

"Hey! Nothing to see up here! Go back to whatever you were doing! Go on!"

Bronte and Kara, having made their way up the plastic stairs, were not about to go anywhere.

"Hmmm." Agnes, as usual, could not hide her embarrassment. She could only ignore it. "Well, I didn't mean *you*! As long as you're here, you can help me out."

"Agnes," Bronte started to say, "what — *how* — ?"

"I'M STILL STUCK!" Axel shouted.

Agnes delivered to him a lateral whack with her tail. "Calm down, idiot!"

Kara quickly stepped between them. "Stop hitting him!"

"I'm not hurting him. Just giving him a little incentive."

"Quiet! Quiet!" Alphonse shouted to the saurs who filled the workroom. "I'm on the *radio*!"

He adjusted the volume in time to hear the announcer say, "In a moment we'll be back to the phones with a voice that's familiar to most of you. That's right, Alphonse is back, and we'll see if he can successfully answer today's trivia question — "

"Toyco!" Alphonse shouted. "Toyco! Toyco! Toyco!"

"After this brief message — "

INSIDE THE CASTLE, Tibor continued to tell his story to Guinevere — between Axel's cries of "I'M STILL STUCK!" and his wrestlings to extricate himself.

"The game was to build universes," Tibor said, looking down at Guinevere. "Tibor and Geraldine possessed computers with the initial settings to expand infinitely compressed matter infinitely in all dimensions. The

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process could be repeated an infinite number of times, with infinite results."

"Infinity," Axel called to Guinevere. "That means a *lot*!"

Guinevere stared at the projected image of Geraldine and Tibor with their gray boxes, presumably the computers, like the little game units some human children still played with in front of their video screens. Two bright sparks appeared before them, which grew into shimmering spheres. From inside each sphere grew another sphere, and from inside that one grew another sphere. The spheres closest to Geraldine were neatly concentric and symmetrical, like ripples from a stone dropped in a pond, but ripples in three dimensions — maybe four. They looked like part of a brilliantly choreographed light show.

The spheres closest to Tibor looked oblong and wobbly, misshapen and unevenly spaced.

Guinevere watched carefully, her head turning from one set of spheres to the other.

Axel tried to push, then pull, himself out. Whatever movement he'd made to squeeze so far into the castle apparently could not be simply reversed. He arched his hind legs and tried to get some traction on the desk's surface, but it didn't work. Perhaps his head had grown, expanding like one of Tibor's or Geraldine's universes.

"Each sphere is a universe. Each universe a probability," said Tibor. "Geraldine's were mathematically perfect. Tibor's were not. Tibor hoped to find perfection in imperfection. It was *not* what Geraldine says: that Tibor didn't know how. Perfection is too simple for Tibor."

"Tibor! Help!" Axel called to him. "I'm stuck in your doorway! How do I get out?"

Tibor continued, oblivious to Axel's predicament: "The world will understand someday that they scorned Tibor unfairly. They will lament! Once, there were worlds with life forms grateful to Tibor! Life forms that worshiped Tibor! That built the great Oracle of Tibor! Tibor Cathedral. Tibor's Hat, the stately rock formation at the foot of Lake Tibor. The planet of the Tiborians. The Tiborus galaxy. Tibor created all probabilities that loved Tibor! And Tibor would reward them with his beneficence and genius!"

Guinevere shook her head. Tibor took no notice. He stared up at his

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own projected images of the gleaming, golden statue of Tibor in the Great Temple of Tibor, one hundred meters tall.

"Had they lived," Tibor said. "Had they lived."

"Hitting him isn't going to get him out!" Kara said.

"He's in there like a cork!" Agnes replied. "*You* give it a try!"

"Can't we, maybe, lift the box up?" asked Bronte.

Agnes shook her head. "Tibor's managed to glue it down with some sort of junk."

"We'll have to think of something else," Bronte said.

"We should go find Tom," said Sluggo.

"No!" Agnes faced the box again. "It's not his business! We've got to figure this out for ourselves!" She raised herself, placing her forelegs on Axel's back, then pressed down on the base of his tail as if it were a pump handle.

"I'M STILL STUCK!" Axel shouted.

"Hmmm!" said Agnes. "That won't work either."

By this time, Doc had arrived. Hubert had lifted him from Dr. Norman's back and placed him more than halfway up the plastic stairs.

"My friends, my thanks," he said, and cautiously climbed the rest of the way.

"And what catastrophe has befallen — " Doc started to say, but, making a quick inspection, he didn't require an answer.

"Good heavens!"

"What are we going to do?" asked Bronte.

"Lubrication is not going to help." Doc gently patted Axel's back with his forepaw.

"Relax, my friend. We'll have you out of there soon enough."

"Not soon enough for Guinevere," Agnes said. "Who knows what sort of idiocy that psycho-saur is telling her!"

Doc put his ear up to the cardboard castle's side. "Whatever he's telling her, he's not being very concise."

"Hey!" Agnes banged on the castle with her tail. "Guinevere! Whatever he's telling you, *don't listen*!"

"STOP HITTING THE BOX!" Axel shouted.

Doc walked to the edge of the desk, where Hubert was waiting to see if he could be of any more help.

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"Do you know where Tom keeps the box knife in his office?"

Hubert nodded slowly.

"Knife?" Bronte looked back at Axel, still kicking and struggling. "We can't use a knife!"

"I know we're not very well adapted to human tools, but we could take a stab — er, we can give it a try."

"What if we slip?"

"It can't be too difficult, it's merely cardboard."

"What is? Axel's head?" Agnes said.

"It isn't that," Bronte said. "We'd be wrecking Tibor's place. I know it's silly. It's delusional, but it's Tibor's. What else *can* it be? It's his — his — *environment*."

"What! Are you nuts?" said Agnes. "Your baby is *inside* that thing!"

"I know," said Bronte, turning from the cardboard walls to Axel. "But we can't wreck Tibor's home."

"Very well," said Doc. "Hubert, we won't use the box knife. We'll have to find another way."

IMPACNEWZRADIO followed their "brief" message with another "brief" message, followed by another "brief" message. Ice cream stores, bedding sales, real estate and youth-restoring over-the-counter inhalants: Alphonse heard about all of it.

"We need to break for weather and headlines, but as soon as we're back we've got Alphonse on the line to answer today's trivia question. Thanks for holding on, Alphonse."

"Toyco!" Alphonse wrapped his duo-digited forepaws into little fists in anticipation.

"The boy I'd been bought for went to school during the day," Preston wrote. "I was alone. I started to read the books on the shelf: the 'Great Books' and the encyclopedia. No one else ever touched them. They were considered as decoration, though they were rarely even dusted. But they helped a great deal when I had to do the boy's homework for him."

* * *

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Inside Tibor's castle, the projected images of Tiborian glory were replaced with the images of Tiborian decline: his universes floundering, faltering, collapsing in on themselves like sandcastles in the Sun.

"Had they lived," Tibor said to Guinevere. "In the few remaining Tiborian universes, worship turned to hatred. Tibor visited these worlds, to help — out of the kindness and goodness and mercy in Tibor's heart — "

Guinevere made a little noise, like a sneeze.

"It was *not* what Geraldine says, that Tibor did not know what he was doing. Tibor suspects conspiracy. Tibor suspects sabotage."

Guinevere sneezed again, only this time the noise sounded more like a chuckle. The noise came out two, three more times. Guinevere couldn't suppress it.

"Across a hundred universes, Tibor was hunted by his enemies," said Tibor. "He lost the means to return to his own universe. It was *not* what Geraldine says: that he doesn't know how. Tibor took the form of a saurian creature, like you. As did Geraldine, who followed Tibor, out of guilt and worry for his well-being.

"And now Tibor works to find a way back to his own time and universe. His true home. Tibor will return."

Guinevere's sneezes increased in number, and as they increased they were joined by the first noises to issue from that tiny, virginal larynx at the top of the apatosaur's slender neck.

It was laughter.

And she kept laughing for some time after Tibor had finished his long, sad tale.

Outside, Doc gestured to Rotomotoman, who was still watching, his display screen still proclaiming WANT : TO : HELP.

"Rotomotoman!" Doc said. "We need your assistance, if you please."

"No you don't!" Agnes said. "That thing's got our eggs in it!"

"My dear Agnes," Doc said, "with all due respect, we need someone or something that can turn and pull Axel with a minimum of difficulty. Hubert here is too big to fit on the desk, but too short to reach Axel from the floor, as would be Diogenes. Our friends, Jean-Claude and Pierrot, might be able to do the job, but the last time I saw them they were transfixed by a copy of some catalog of meat."

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"Buffoons!" Agnes said. "Idiots!"

"What we need, frankly, is a pair of hands, which Rotomotoman has. Our friend, Tom, also has a pair of hands. If you would prefer to call for him — "

"Oh shut up!" Agnes said. "You win. But if anything happens to those eggs — "

"Completely understood," Doc replied. "Hubert, if you could stand just behind our cylindrical assistant in the unlikely event that he loses balance — "

Hubert placed himself behind Rotomotoman, legs and forepaws spread in a kind of near-embrace.

"Now, Rotomotoman," Doc continued, "if you could adjust your height enough to allow you a firm but gentle grip on the little fellow's ankles. And Axel — "

"Yes, Doc?" Axel said, from the other side of the cardboard wall.

"Please cease kicking, if you would."

"Okay!"

Rotomotoman extended the metal tubes on which his wheels were affixed (and were usually retracted into his torso), raising his height just the few centimeters necessary to reach out straight with his metal hands and take hold of Axel's ankles.

"Now," Doc said, "raise him just a bit and turn him this way, on his back." Doc made a counterclockwise gesture with his forepaw.

"Kara, Bronte: if you can get your forelegs a little under him as Rotomotoman does that, you can keep Axel from chafing."

"Hey!" Axel called out as the makeshift crew went to work. "What are you doing?"

"Unscrewing your head!" Agnes said. "Like a lightbulb."

"AAAAAA!"

"Not exactly, little friend," Doc told him. "But I think I know a way to get you out. You must, however, do one thing for me, at least for a few minutes, if you can."

"Sure, Doc. What do I have to do?"

"Close your mouth."

"I can do that! Watch!" Not that anyone but Tibor and Guinevere *could* watch, nor did they, but he really did close his mouth.

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"Mouth closed?"

"Mmmm-mmmm!"

"Good work!" Doc patted him again.

"Now, lift!" Doc said to Rotomotoman. "Up! Straight up, but with a bit of an arc! Pull — just a trace! Yes! I think we've almost got him free!"

Rotomotoman extended his legs a little higher and lifted Axel until he was completely upside-down, but nearly extricated. The snout part of his head was still inside the castle. Doc reached down and placed a forepaw on either side of Axel's head.

"You've done very well, good Axel. Now all we need to do is pull your head just — a bit — more.

"All those years," he said softly, "helping children with their wooden block toys and puzzles have finally paid off."

With Axel just a few millimeters away from freedom, Doc hardly took notice of how much louder he had to speak even to hear himself in these quiet remarks.

But it was more apparent when Agnes nudged him over and shouted into the box, "Guinevere! Come out of there!" — and *that* was hard for him to hear — that something was intruding on the already chaotic ambience of the room.

A noise of some sort — a *humming*, though it could also be understood as a rapid, steady oscillation.

This humming noise was accompanied by the brightening light from the ceiling fixture, which escaped notice until it occurred to some of the saurs in the workroom that the ceiling fixture had not been turned on, it being the midafternoon of a pleasant summer day.

The littlest saurs were especially aware of the light, and the hum — and most particularly of the vibrations through the floor that seemed to be coming from both.

Doc looked up when he heard the crackle of delicate glass in the light fixture. Off it went. The shards of bulb, fortunately, were contained within the fixture itself.

Bronte tried to say something to Doc, which he couldn't make out. He wondered if he might be going deaf but then, as if to dispel this fear, he turned to a greater one — across the workroom.

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Geraldine's lab was alive with intense light. It could have been a theater's or movie studio's arc lamp, or a lighthouse beacon — Doc wouldn't have been surprised. The light did have a sort of direction — a concreteness to it, like a shaft — directed across the room and through the window.

The fire extinguishers, in that instant, seemed ridiculously inadequate.

Some of the little ones, understandably frightened, headed for the door, squealing.

The Five Wise Buddhasaurs, sitting comfortably on a plastic cube not unlike Doc's, burst into applause at the light, the hum, and the panic.

"Hee-hee!" said the Buddhasaur triceratops. The Buddhasaur stegosaurus said "Hah-hah!" The Buddhasaur allosaurus, hadrosaur, and tyrannosaur answered, "Ho-ho!" and cackled.

"I lived with those homeless people for several months," Preston wrote to the graduate student, "sleeping in the underpass. I justified my 'keep' by making signs they used when panhandling."

He had to squint now to read over his words. Not only was the light from Geraldine's lab creating a glare, but the image itself was fading, as if the power was being drained from his screen.

"Eventually, the police rounded them up and I was taken along. That's when I was turned over to the Atherton people."

He now felt clearly that revealing the truth about himself was not a good idea. The news would be met with disbelief. If not, he feared the reaction to his novels would be driven more by novelty than the relative merits of what he had written.

Still, he wanted the chance to read over this little biography and get a feel for what it *might* be like to tell the world (or at least a curious graduate student) who he really was.

For, in a sense, he wouldn't really know the answer until he had written it.

"Now we're back," the radio announcer said. But the digital signal seemed to be encountering interference. Pieces of it, like tiles on an old mosaic, were dropping out.

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"— think Alphonse is sti__on the line. Alphonse, thanks___ waiting."

"Toyco! Toyco! Toyco!" Alphonse pressed the phone tightly to his ear.

"Now, __repeat __day's triv__ ques___, what major toy com____ once ____ the slogan, '____ our labs to ____ playrooms'?"

"Toyco!" Alphonse shouted again. "It's Toyco! Toyco!"

AGNES AND BRONTE peeked into the space between Axel's head and the entrance of Tibor's castle to get a glimpse of Guinevere. Doc pulled Axel's head out a little farther: almost there.

So far, Axel had done just what Doc requested, kept his mouth closed and restrained himself from saying anything or making any noise.

But when the same overpowering light that emanated from Geraldine's lab came out of Tibor's castle as well — in one bright, humming flash — Axel was left with one, predictable, recourse:

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

Doc had to turn away, at once temporarily blinded and deafened. He tried to signal to Rotomotoman to bring Axel down slowly, but Rotomotoman was motionless, as if his batteries had drained. The display screen on his torso filled with an apparently random hodgepodge of Greek and Arabic alphabet characters.

Axel, left dangling in the firm grip of Rotomotoman, continued, somewhat more emphatically:

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

With the light now coming out of both cardboard edifices, the Five Wise Buddhasaurs applauded even more effusively, much as if a fireworks display had come to a stunning finale.

"I'm sor__, __phonse, ___ we couldn't quite he__ that answer. Could you _____ turn your rad__ down, please?"

"TOYCO! TOYCO! TOYYYYCOOO!"

"Alphonse? Alphonse?"

"*TOOOOYCO*!"

"Sorry, _think we've lost Alphonse. We___getting___of_____ference. _____ go___ to ____ ___ move on to the next — "

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"TOY— !" Alphonse's mouth was still open, but the last syllable never made it out.

The light grew even brighter. For a moment, the light was all anyone could see —

And then it was gone, and with it the infernal hum and the crackling rush of air. The workroom fell silent — or almost so.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

Preston looked at his display screen — empty! Except for the little word "Sent," on the function display line above his toolbar.

He felt numb and practically had to will himself to breathe. He thought: What have I done? and slowly closed his eyes.

"Guinevere? Guinevere?" Bronte looked into Tibor's castle. "Guinevere? You can come out now!"

"Guinevere!" Agnes pushed past Bronte and poked her head through the doorway. "Hey! Time to go! Smells terrible in here!"

Rotomotoman jolted back to life. He gently lowered Axel to the top of the desk while his display screen clicked through a number of punctuation marks and a spasm of diagonal interference. At last he locked upon the message, AXEL : SAFE.

Axel, out of the box, rocked from one side to the other, trying to stand up.

"Relax," Doc said, helping him up. "Slowly. You've been through quite an ordeal."

"Hey, Doc! Guys! You won't believe! I saw *my own body* like it was on the *other side of the room*!"

"Calm down," Doc said gently. "Are you all right? Can you see?"

"Yeah! I see — *spots*! And they're shaped like Guinevere and Tibor!"

"I think we're all seeing spots," Doc said. "Fortunately, not like that."

Doc looked across the room, at Geraldine's lab, and his jaw dropped open.

"Oh — my — dear!"

"Guinevere?" Bronte looked once more into Tibor's castle. "Please come out. We're worried about you."

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Her eyes were still clouded from the blast of light. All she could make out, faintly, in Tibor's castle was Tibor, or just his forelegs, in the shadows. Guinevere was not to be seen.

Doc tapped her gently on the back. His voice faltered and sounded higher-pitched than usual.

"She — she's over *there*!"

Bronte withdrew her head from the cardboard box. Doc was pointing across the room, to Geraldine's lab — and to Guinevere, who had just emerged from it.

Bronte blinked, as if it might just be an effect of the light, then looked again.

"Agnes," Bronte said, as she watched Guinevere walk to the edge of the desk and smile over at them. "You said — "

"She *was*!" Agnes's mouth dropped open. "I *saw* her go in myself!"

"She was in *there*!" Axel pointed to Tibor's castle. "Now she's over *there*!" He pointed back to Guinevere. "That's like — *super science!*"

"I don't see this." Agnes said. "I *refuse* — "

"Maybe it's a trick," Sluggo said, "like the magic shows on the video."

"If so, then how?" Doc asked. "The stage magicians have trapdoors. Where is the trap door here?"

"It's in *space*!" Axel said, stretching to rub his neck with his forepaw. "Like, the wormy-holes where everything gets sucked in and comes out on Saturn!"

"Axel, my friend," Doc said. "I try not to discount any fairly reasonable hypothesis, but I do wish that reality would be a little kinder to my sensibilities."

"Tibor!" Kara called into the cardboard castle. "Tibor! I know you're in there."

"Tibor is *not*!" The shaken voice came from inside.

"Tibor! What happened?"

He didn't answer. When Kara peered in she could make out no more than a shadow, shuddering in a corner.

Bronte shouted, "Guinevere! Stay there! I'm coming!" and started down the plastic stairs. The others followed, and as soon as they were all on the floor, Hubert rolled the plastic stairs over to Geraldine's desk.

Alphonse stared at the little group walking from Tibor's desk to

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Geraldine's, but really didn't see them. The phone had dropped from his open forepaw.

Rosie nudged him consolingly. "*We* know, anyway."

"You did good," Charlie said as he switched off the radio. "Doesn't matter what they know."

"It does," Alphonse said, then corrected himself: "It *did*."

"Tomorrow," said Elliot, as Veronica carefully closed up the phone with her snout. "Won't be a record, but — tomorrow."

PRESTON, LOOKING at his empty screen, resigned himself to his fate. The world would discover the identity of Ellis Lawrence Cartwright. Or maybe Jeanne, the graduate student, wouldn't believe him. Or if she did, maybe no one would believe *her*. But if they did, what would happen then?

He checked his "sent" folder — the message wasn't there!

It was possible that the message had been intercepted by something, or just disintegrated in whatever strange power surge emanated from Geraldine's lab.

Which meant the message might not have been sent after all.

He put the keyboard down to his side as if coming out of a trance, stood up, and for the first time that afternoon he looked around the workroom.

Half the saurs in the house seemed to be there, all staring up at Geraldine's desk as if something astounding — or appalling — had just happened there. But all Preston could see was Guinevere, standing at the edge of the desk as her mother, Kara, Agnes, Sluggo, Axel and Doc made their way to her.

Geraldine's lab was dark and still.

Tom found the suspicious "forestry service" van about where he expected to find it, parked in a small clearing roughly twenty meters out past the property line and security perimeter.

Nothing much about it suggested that it had anything to do with forestry. The only thing on or around it that even vaguely qualified as equipment was a rather long antenna fixed dead center atop the cab.

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He couldn't detect any activity around the van, and no one was visible inside or nearby it — like it had simply been parked there.

He was about to move on and see if he could find some sign of the van's occupants elsewhere when he heard an odd noise: like a gust of wind and a sizzling of atmosphere, followed by a bright flash, like lightning.

On a clear, nearly cloudless afternoon.

Still, he instinctively hit the ground.

He didn't hear anything like thunder but remained flat in the moss and cool dirt until he heard a muffled yelp and a startled expletive that sounded like it came from the back of the van.

Tom looked up at the van. A white-bluish smoke escaped through the back doors. The engine started up quickly, gunned, and the van jolted into motion with a gear-stripping groan.

As it pulled away, the van just missed a tree. The antenna bent severely as it caught in the lower branches.

Tom watched them — heard them, really — connect abruptly with the service road on the other side of the dense line of trees, and head off with a roar. In the hazy smoke the van left behind, he smelled something distinct from the smells of even an old, inefficient, gas-burning vehicle (and the van didn't look *that* old): something more like burning plastic, and that "ozone" smell one associates with electrical fires.

He pressed a finger and thumb up to his mustache. Perhaps something in the van had malfunctioned. But he remembered that he first heard that strange sizzling noise *behind* him.

Tom turned around, where he could clearly see the house.

It might have been an intuitive leap, or his imagination getting the better of him, but he saw (or thought he did) a flicker of light — from that distance no more than a little glass bead catching the sunlight — in the workroom window.

Tom ran all the way back to the house.

"Guinevere?" Bronte gently nuzzled her child's head. "It's time to go. I'm reading a book to Hetman downstairs. It's called *Ulysses*. Would you like to listen with us?"

Guinevere pressed herself against her mother's side and nodded.

"I think we should be together more. It's very nice of Agnes and Axel

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to keep an eye on you, but maybe they should have some more time for themselves. Don't you think?"

Guinevere shook her head.

Geraldine peeked out of her lab just as Tom made it up to the workroom, breathless, holding his chest.

"What — " Tom said and stopped to take a few extra breaths. He looked at the saurs in front of Geraldine's lab, then at Geraldine, in her doorway — then he took a second look at her.

She was wearing goggles.

Tiny, Geraldine-sized goggles. They might have been appropriated from some child's doll or action figure, but how did the little quadruped ever get them *on*?

"What did I just, conveniently, miss?" Tom asked Doc.

Doc raised his forepaws and let them drop back down slowly. "Is there a chance that one might find a few drops, just a thimbleful, maybe, of vodka in the house?"

Axel whispered to Guinevere, as he pointed to the pair of jeans Tom was wearing. "See that flap where Tom's got his hand? That's a *pocket*!"

Geraldine stepped out of her lab. She smiled at Bronte, who protectively stepped forward to place herself between Geraldine and Guinevere.

Geraldine smiled at Guinevere too, but for once her smile appeared to suggest that she was *sharing* her private joke.

She nodded to Guinevere.

And Guinevere nodded back.

Bronte shuddered. And when she noticed that Guinevere was smiling very much the way Geraldine smiled, she hurried her child back down the plastic stairs.

"Monster!" Agnes barked at Geraldine. "Demon! You are insane and dangerous!"

"So what?" said Geraldine.

Doc and Sluggo managed to restrain Agnes before any further escalation occurred.

Geraldine walked to the edge of the desk and surveyed the workroom as if she were making an assessment of it and all the rest of the great world

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beyond it, fixing her gaze last upon the cardboard box that Tibor called his castle.

"Tibor's universe," was her conclusion.

Nothing stirred in the cardboard box for a good two minutes, until Tibor, very cautiously, poked his head out from his castle.

Geraldine repeated: "Tibor's."

Tibor took a moment to digest this and then, as if swelling himself with a great breath, returned to his serene, imperial posture.

"Tibor's!" he said and, with order restored to his universe, he retired to his castle.

Tom stood in a spot just between Geraldine's lab and Tibor's castle. He looked up at the light fixture with its broken bulb, then bent down a little, as if trying to get a desk-eye view of what could be seen through the workroom window.

He pressed his finger thoughtfully up to his mustache and started to ask, "Geraldine — " then shook his head and turned to Preston.

"I don't suppose you would know — "

"Sorry." Preston shook his head. "I was a little involved in my work. It all happened rather suddenly."

Tom, with his eyes closed, nodded. "That it did. Whatever it was."

He held up a finger and said, "I need to make a call. I'll be back later to replace that bulb."

As he left, Jean-Claude and Pierrot came running in, Pierrot holding open a page of the Idaho Steak Ranch catalog.

"Tom! Tom!" said Pierrot. "Why can't we get meat that looks like *this*?"

Tom looked at the open page. "Because, guys, that is a side of beef. We don't buy sides of beef." He headed out of the room.

"Well, why *not*?" asked Pierrot.

"Hey," Jean-Claude asked, looking around the room. "Something happen here?"

"Who knows?" Tom ushered them into the hallway.

In the middle of the room, Alphonse was still sitting among his companions, but they were joined by the Five Wise Buddhasaurs, who had gone off and returned with their instruments. They were playing, for

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Alphonse, something that might have sounded like "Chicago Breakdown" colliding with "Beau Koo Jack" simultaneously, or just the random squealings and squawks of five plastic horns interspersed with "Hah-hah," "Ho-ho," and "Hee-hee."

But they were playing for Alphonse, and Alphonse was smiling.

"Hey, Preston!" Axel pushed the plastic stairs over to Preston's desk. "I brought this back for you!"

"Thank you, Axel."

"Agnes said I should have my head examined!"

"Agnes says that to everyone," Preston said. "Does your head hurt?"

He turned his head experimentally, first left, then right. "No! It feels fine! My neck is a little stiff!"

"That should go away soon. If it doesn't, make sure to tell Dr. Margaret."

"Oh, I *will*!"

Axel stood in front of the plastic stairs, just looking at them.

"Preston?"

"Yes, Axel."

"They want me to stay away from Guinevere! Agnes said I'm *dangerous*!"

"That's not for Agnes to decide. I'm sure it's only for a while. Bronte knows how you feel about Guinevere. She also knows you're not dangerous." And Preston added, to himself, *at least not intentionally*.

"I still got a lot of things to teach Guinevere!" He looked down at his feet, as if unable to look anywhere else. "I didn't mean to get my head stuck in Tibor's castle! And Guinevere is — she's — *fast*!"

"Axel," Preston said, "If you'll give me a minute or two to finish something I'm writing, I'd like to hear about everything that happened to you and Guinevere, if you'd like to tell me about it."

"YES!" Axel hurried up the stairs, smiling. "Yes! Preston! My best-best friend in the whole world! Yes!"

"Just a few more minutes." He sat back down and returned his keyboard to his outstretched legs.

He reprised all the information about his work habits that he had already given to the graduate student, but left out all of his "confession."

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If she did receive the earlier message, he could say it was a story he was working on that was inadvertently included.

He looked back to find not only Axel but Rotomotoman as well, staring at him. But their wonder and curiosity seemed much less worrying than the scrutiny of a graduate student.

"I saw the *whole* universe!" Axel said. "It was small, but it wasn't anything like a *pocket*!"

"Just a moment," Preston said. "I'm almost finished."

"About my 'philosophy,'" Preston wrote. "It's no different from any other creature's with a sense of good and evil, right and wrong, and some sense of a world beyond one's internal meanderings. If anything distinguishes my personal philosophy from anyone else's, it may be my feeling that we are in the employ of some 'unknown power,' as Matthew Arnold would have put it. But I'm divided as to whether that power belongs to a being of great aspirations allied with a bungling self-centeredness — "

Preston glanced back at Tibor's castle, then at Geraldine's lab to his left.

" — or one of great but mischievous energies, the goals of which, or of whom, we can only hope are benign."

In the background Preston heard, from a tiny Buddhasaur horn, something that sounded very much like the solo from "Basin Street Blues."

"Patience," he wrote. "That's it in a word. My thanks again for your interest."

He read the lines over with the same sort of trepidation he felt when he finished his first novel — when he finished anything, for that matter — and hit the "send" key.

"There," he said to Axel. "That's done. Now tell me all about what happened."

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CURIOSITIES

MARCH OF THE ROBOTS, BY "LEO BRETT" (1961)

FROM 1954 to 1965, Lionel Fanthorpe produced almost the entire SF/supernatural list of the sleazy British imprint Badger Books — in his spare time. His output under many pseudonyms ran to well over two hundred novels and collections.

At this pace, padding became a way of life. Alien races in *Forbidden Planet* (1961) can teleport in different ways about a sixty-four-planet battleground...cueing a voluminous, barely disguised exposition of chess. *Galaxy 666* (1963) devotes pages to nuances of landscape color:

> It gave an overall impression of greyness streaked with pink and white, rather than an over-all impression of whiteness tinged with grey and pink, or an overall impression of pink streaked with grey and white.

A favorite for reading aloud is *March of the Robots*, especially when the eponymous invaders land:

> Terrifying things, steel things; metal things; things with cylindrical bodies and multitudinous jointed limbs. Things without flesh and blood. Things that were made of metal and plastic and transistors and valves and relays, and wires. Metal things. Metal things that could think. *Thinking metal things.* Terrifying in their strangeness, in their peculiar metal efficiency. Things the like of which had never been seen on the earth before. Things that were sliding back panels...*Robots!* Robots were marching...

Listeners find themselves chanting along to the inexorable rhythms:

> The city slept. Men slept. Women slept. Children slept. Dogs and cats slept.

In 2002 the author, now the Reverend Lionel Fanthorpe, celebrated fifty years in print. The best or worst of his Badger excesses are collected in *Down the Badger Hole* (1995) ed. Debbie Cross.

—David Langford

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